川上 稔

イラスト・さとやす（TENKY）

GENESISシリーズ

境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまで

II 上

Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon - Kimitoasamade - Volume 02-A

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GENESISシリーズ

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II 上

川上稔

イラスト・さとやす（TENKY）

特-3

GENESISシリーズ 境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまでⅡ〈上〉

川上 稔

特典文庫

BCXA
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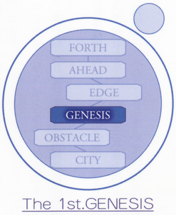

NOT FOR SALE

川上 稔

1975年1月3日生まれ。東京出身。先日、特典小説Ⅱ〈下〉の原稿を無事書き上げ、現在は原作本Ⅴ巻の執筆に取り掛かり中。2012年7月から始まるアニメ2期ともども宜しく御願い致します。

【特典文庫】
GENESISシリーズ境界線上のホライゾン
きみとあさまで Ⅰ〈上〉
きみとあさまで Ⅰ〈下〉
きみとあさまで Ⅱ〈上〉

【電撃文庫】
GENESISシリーズ
境界線上のホライゾン Ⅰ〈上〉〈下〉
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境界線上のホライゾン Ⅳ〈上〉〈中〉〈下〉

イラスト:さとやす(TENKY)

山形生まれの栃木育ち「杏仁豆腐はいつもおいしい。お菓子で杏仁豆腐味ってのが増えればいいな」あの、たまに入ってる赤いの。あれ何て言うんでしたっけか先生。

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カバー／旭印刷

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inside story

『喜美の隙見て』

喜美は走っていた。軽いステップだ。早朝の武蔵野から奥多摩までは、輸送関係の道が多数延びているので行き来は楽だ。だから急ぎ、手荷物持って、

「あ・さ・ま・じ・ん・じゃ・あ〜あああっ」

と、奥多摩にある巨大な吹き抜けに至る。

本来なら、浅間神社に至るには、艦首側にある階段を下りて、正面から参内する。が、喜美の場合はちょっと違う。特に今回は違う。だから、

「ミトツダイラゲット……！」

正面側の階段から参内しようとした銀狼を脇から拾って抱え上げ、スピンしながら走って重心調整。そのまま爪先に力の軸を通して、前に跳べば、

「マッハ出るわよマッハ！」

「一体どこに行く気ですの——！」

「浅間神社に決まってるじゃない。大丈夫？」

「と、通り過ぎつつありますのよ!?　裏からだと滝と川があって入れませんし」

そうかしら、と、喜美は浅間神社の右舷吹き抜け縁から、神社の裏手側、艦尾吹き抜け縁の方に跳んだ。吹き抜けの艦尾側、断崖のような剥き出し階層中央にある階段へと跳んだのだ。

左腕に抱えたミトツダイラが落ちそうなので、空中で腰によるスピンを入れて重心を整える。すると、持ち上がったミトツダイラが、

「きゃあああああ！」

「大丈夫大丈夫。フフ、こっちの方が早いのよ？」

飛距離は充分。一階分を下に落ちながら、浅間神社の後部側を左から後ろへと斜めに通過。そのまま吹き抜けの艦尾側、地下一階の通路に至り、しかし、

「ハイ、ステップ」

床には下りない。足をつくのはテラス状となった通路の手すりの部分だ。右の爪先で、手すりの吹き抜け側に着地し、身を縮めれば、下には浅間神社の裏手が見えている。だから、

「それ」

一回転入れての落下位置は浅間神社の中央最後部。覗きや雨よけの屋根を越えた狭い空間だった。そこにあるのは浅間神社の泉で、今まさに泉を出ようとしていた浅間がいる。

喜美は、身をひねり、脱衣所に入ろうとしていた浅間と、屋根との間に飛び込んだ。そして、

「す・き・あ・りっ」

浅間が体に巻いていたタオルを、背から唇で引き剥がす。ついでに舌で一舐め。

悲鳴があがって、水飛沫が派手に二つ上がった。

inside story

HONNEAMISE™

GENESISシリーズ
境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまでⅡ〈上〉

川上　稔

特典文庫

GENESISシリーズ　境界線上のホライゾン
きみとあさまでⅡ〈上〉
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特典文庫
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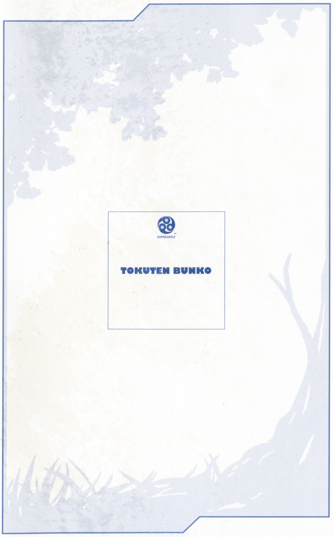

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TOKUTEN BUNKO

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境界線上のホライゾン
Horizon on the Middle of Nowhere

Kimitoasamade

Chapter 9 "Those who Look Back from Above and Below" ··· P5
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Chapter 15 "Intruder on the Hunting Ground" ··· P183

II
Ⓐ

Kawakami Minoru

Illustrations: **Satoyasu** (TENKY)
Design: Watanabe Kouichi (2725 Inc)

character

Musashi

Asama Tomo

A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. The only daughter of the Asama Shrine and a mid-level shrine maiden. Specializes in archery and in tuning ley lines. Stands at the top of the class's boob caste system. Childhood friends with the nudist and his stupid sister.

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A normal citizen. Or rather, an automaton. Apparently boarded the Musashi at Mikawa this spring. Has no memories, was taken in by the Blue Thunder, and works there. Cement-like.

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A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Barely appears so there might be no point in putting her here. Works as a team leader in the engine division and has one false arm.

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Number one character in Class Plum to have no one know who you're talking about if you refer to her by her family name. A merchant and Shirojiro's partner.

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Crossdressing girl who transferred in from Mikawa. Let me say that again: crossdressing girl. No, that doesn't mean she wears a cross. Her gags get icy reactions.

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Owns the Blue Thunder. Has a bunch of "she's actually..." type of secrets. A lot of people feel their heart flutter at the open back of her clothing.

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Aren't going to work hard this time.

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Pope-Chancellor. The representative of the Testament Union. Fought Sakai long ago and had the other man quit while he was ahead. Tsundere.

Galileo

That man famous for the heliocentric theory appears here as a demon. Innocen's former homeroom teacher.

character

CHAPTER 9

"Those who Look Back from Above and Below"

I haven't forgotten
But I still hesitate
This is my compromise
Point Allocation (Teenager)

Inside Story

Kimi Finds an Opening

Kimi ran. Her step was light. There were plenty of transportation routes from Musashino to Okutama early in the morning, so it was an easy trip and she hurried with her baggage in hand.

“A – Sa – Ma – Shriiiiiine!”

She reached a giant atrium in Okutama.

The normal way to the Asama Shrine was to take the stairs down by the bow and arrive from the front, but things were different for Kimi. Especially this time. So…

“Mitotsudaira’s mine!”

She grabbed and picked up the silver wolf from the side as the girl tried to enter through the front stairway. Kimi then spun around and adjusted her balance while running. She placed her axis of power on her toe tips and leaped forward.

“Time for Mach speed! Mach speed!”

“Where do you think you’re going!?”

“The Asama Shrine of course. Are you okay?”

“Y-you just passed it! We can’t get in from the back because of the waterfall and river.”

“Is that so?”

Kimi jumped from the starboard edge of the Asama Shrine’s atrium to the aft edge behind the shrine. She jumped to the stairs in the center of cliff-like layers sticking out from the wall.

Mitotsudaira nearly fell from her left arm, so she used her hips for a midair spin to adjust her center of gravity. And as she lifted Mitotsudaira up…

“Kyaaaaah!”

"Don't worry, don't worry. Heh heh. This way's faster."

The jump provided enough distance. While falling one level down, they moved diagonally from the left of the Asama Shrine to the rear. They landed on the passageway one level belowground at the aft end of the atrium. But…

"And a step."

She did not land on the floor. The railing of the terrace-like passageway was more than enough for her feet. Her right toes landed on the atrium side of the railing and she ducked down to view the back of the Asama Shrine below. So…

"There."

She made a single flip as she fell and landed in the back of the Asama Shrine. It was a small space beyond the roof meant to protect against peepers and rain. The Asama Shrine's spring was there and Asama was just leaving it.

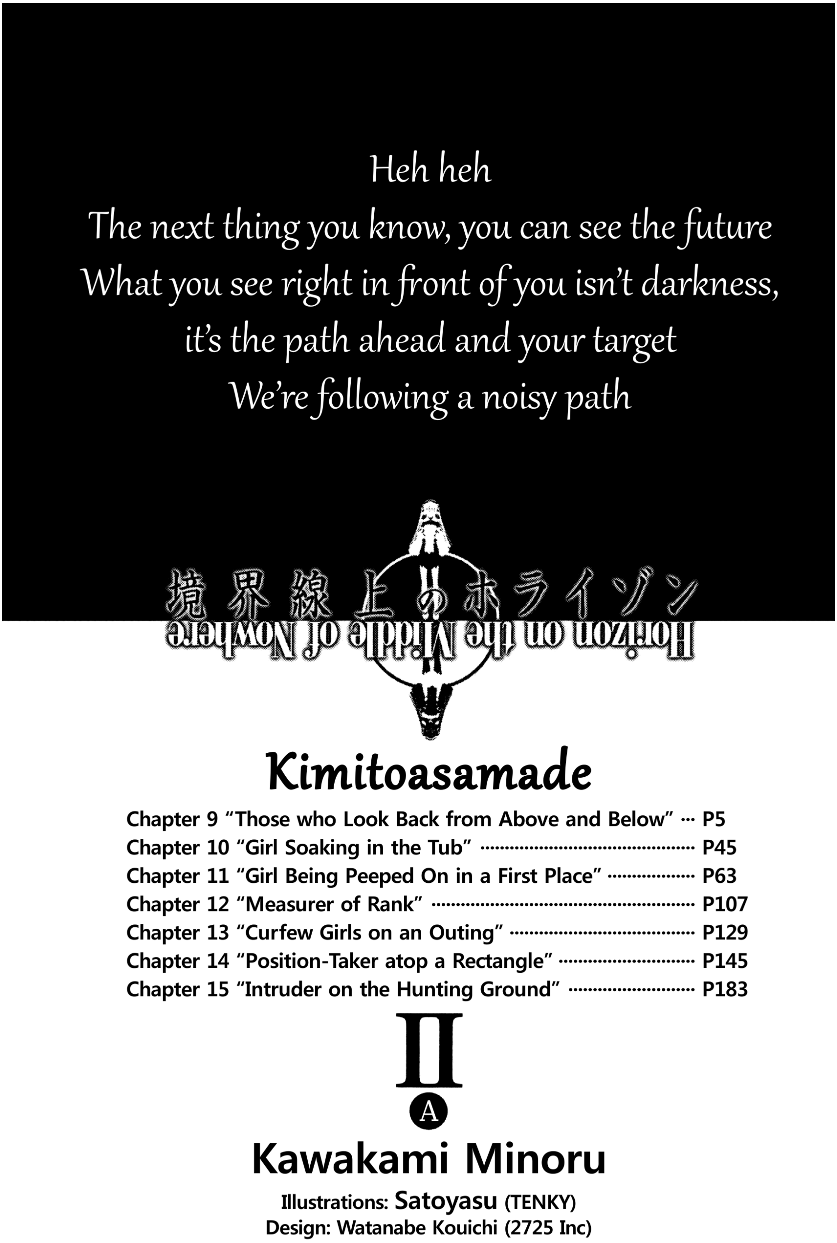
Kimi twisted around and jumped between Asama, who was just about to enter the changing room, and the roof. And…

"Found – an – opening!"

She stripped Asama's towel off the girl's back with her lips. Then she licked those lips.

There was a scream and two loud splashes.

Title Page



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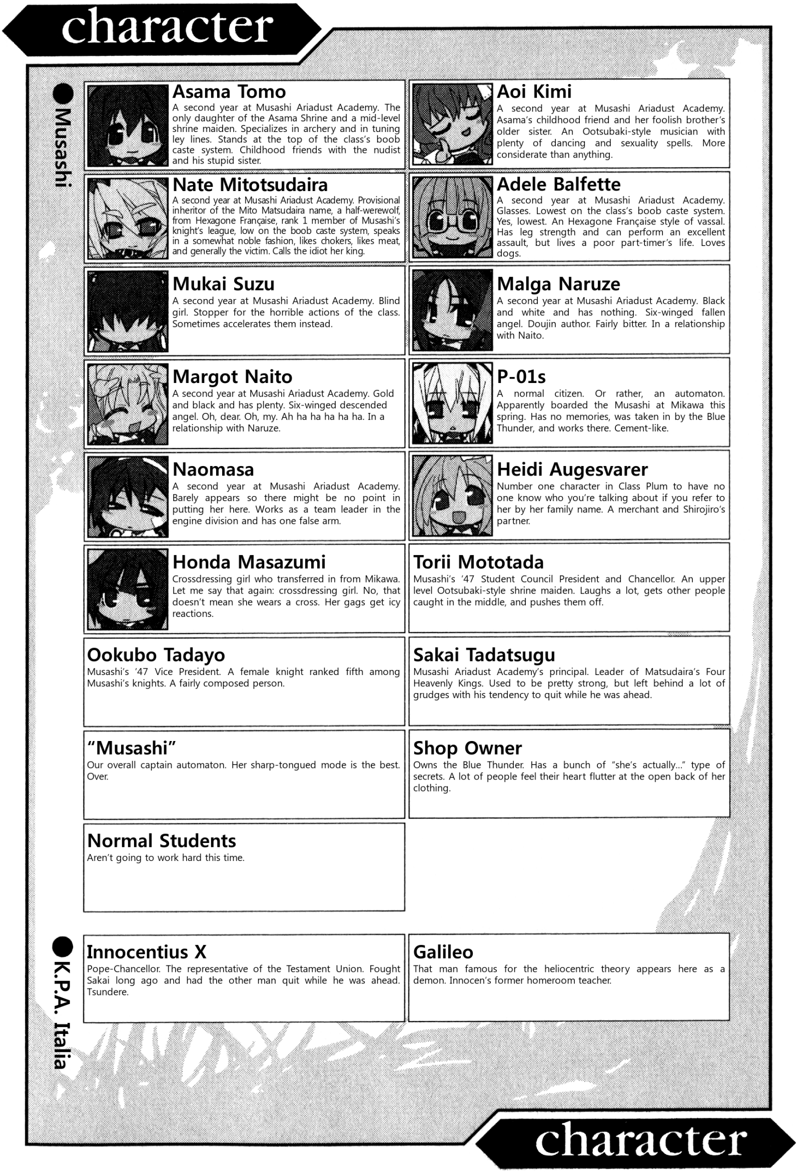

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Glossary

A

- **Academy:** An educational facility. Used as the center of political and military power. Tend to have many branch schools.
- **Academy Rules:** The basic laws upheld between academies. Agreed to by the Testament Union.
- **Apocalypse:** The end of the world. 1648 when the Testament's history descriptions end.
- **ATELL:** The smallest unit of ether. Used for spells.

B

- **Blessings:** The amount of ether needed for a human to exist for one hour. 3600 ATELL. Conversion unit for a spell's ATELL consumption.

C

- **Catholic:** The old mainstream version of Tsirhc.
- **Chancellor's Officers:** An organization led by the chancellor which leads the academy and performs work such as defense.
- **Contradiction Allowance:** The foundational ability of the world. Allows the simultaneous existence of all sorts of physical laws.

D

- **Divine States:** Former name of the Far East.
- **Divine Weapon:** A weapon that, unlike a normal weapon, has a unique ability.

E

- **Emperor:** A divine individual who is said to control the ley lines using the Imperial Regalia in Kyou. Does not interfere with the world.
- **England:** Uses a floating island and does not control any Far Eastern land or Far Eastern daimyo.
- **Ether:** Component that makes up contradiction-allowing space.
- **Ether Engine:** An engine that uses ether's space-altering ability. The effect changes based on the internal crest.
- **Ether Fuel:** Ether that has been purified into fuel. Used as External Blessings or for ether engines.
- **Ether Reactor:** A reactor that extracts and purifies ether from the air. Has a lower output than a ley line reactor, but is relatively safe.
- **External Blessings:** Blessings accumulated outside of oneself. Ether fuel is an example.

F

- **Far East:** Name of the Divine States after the Harmonic Unification War.

G

- **God of War:** A giant humanoid machine that people combine with to move.
- **Graduation:** No limit for nations other than the Far East. Far Easterners must graduate at 18.

H

- **Harmonic Territory:** Locations where the fallen Harmonic World Divine States unified with the real world while breaking apart.
- **Harmonic Unification War:** A war between the harmonic world residents and the real world (Divine States) residents after the destruction of the harmonic world. The harmonic world residents won and began a provisional rule over the Divine States.
- **Harmonic World:** A former alternate space that copied the Divine States. Preserved through ley line control.
- **Hexagone Française:** Mouri clan + France.
- **History Recreation:** Recreating the Testament descriptions to maintain the path the world takes.

I

- **Inherited Name:** The name of a historical figure given to an appropriate individual for the history recreation.
- **Internal Blessings:** blessings stored within oneself.
- **IZUMO:** The Far East's largest corporation. The headquarters for Far Eastern shrines and the corporation that built the Musashi.

J

- **Judge/Judgment:** Means "understood". Used by criminals.

K

- **K.P.A. Italia:** Association of Aki States + Union of Italian City States.

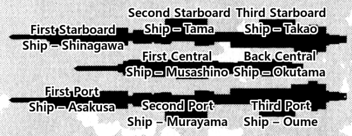
L

- **Ley Line:** The thicker of the pathways through which ether flows.

words

words

•**Shirasago Enterprises:** IZUMO's shrine brand.


Second Starboard Ship – Tama
Third Starboard Ship – Takao
First Starboard Ship – Shinagawa
First Central Ship – Musashino
Back Central Ship – Okutama
First Port Ship – Asakusa
Second Port Ship – Murayama
Third Port Ship – Oume

•**Sign Frame:** Spell device needed to use each religion's basic protection.
•**Spell:** Causing a miracle in a certain space by processing ether.
•**Student Council:** The organization that handles an academy's domestic and foreign affairs.
•**Substitution:** Offering something to please a god instead of using Blessings to activate a spell.

T

•**Tes/Testament:** Means "understood".
•**Testament:** A history book that provides the history of the earth's previous age. There are seven pairs and excerpts.
•**Testament Descriptions:** History of the earth's previous age that is automatically updated by the Testament. However, it stopped updating after the description for 1648.
•**Testament Union:** An organization meant to lead the history recreation.
•**Tres España:** Oouchi and Ootomo clans + Spain. Currently includes Portugal.
•**Tsirhc:** A religion which places the Son of God at the top. Worships the Testament.

M

•**Magic:** Folk spells currently under persecution in Europe.
•**M.H.R.R.:** Hashiba clan + Holy Roman Empires.
•**Mikawa:** Destroyed by the collapse of Lord Motonobu's ley line reactor.
•**Mlasi:** A later non-Tsirhc religion that also worships the Testament.
•**Mouse:** A spirit beast device to act as an intermediary between the Shinto religion and its musicians. Other religions use different names.
•**Musashi:** Aerial city ship. The sole independent territory allowed for the Far East.
•**Musashi Ariadust Academy:** The Far East's representative academy which exists on Okutama of Musashi.
•**Musician:** A religion's worshiper.

O

•**Offering:** Providing a god with something they will enjoy or Internal Blessings.
•**Orei Metallo/Nero:** Ore or water containing ether. Can be used as ether fuel.

P

•**P.A. Oda:** Oda clan + Ottomans.
•**Protestant:** A new style of Tsirhc created to escape the corruption of Catholicism and to adjust to the new age.

R

•**Religion:** Organizations or groups that worship a god or the Testament.

S

•**Shinto:** Far Eastern religion. Worships the Far Eastern gods and uses divine music spells.

●Asama's Plans●

"Sis! Sis! What are you and Asama going to do!?"

"Heh heh heh. Well, we're going to continue our date by eating ice cream, taking a bath, and keeping things exciting!"

A

- Academy: An educational facility. Used as the center of political and military power. Tend to have many branch schools.

- Academy Rules: The basic laws upheld between academies. Agreed to by the Testament Union.
- Apocalypse: The end of the world. 1648 when the Testament's history descriptions end.
- ATELL: The smallest unit of ether. Used for spells.

B

- Blessings: The amount of ether needed for a human to exist for one hour. 3600 ATELL. Conversion unit for a spell's ATELL consumption.

C

- Catholic: The old mainstream version of Tsirhc.
- Chancellor's Officers: An organization led by the chancellor which leads the academy and performs work such as defense.
- Contradiction Allowance: The foundational ability of the world. Allows the simultaneous existence of all sorts of physical laws.

D

- Divine States: Former name of the Far East.
- Divine Weapon: A weapon that, unlike a normal weapon, has a unique ability.

E

- Emperor: A divine individual who is said to control the ley lines using the Imperial Regalia in Kyou. Does not interfere with the world.
- England: Uses a floating island and does not control any Far Eastern land or Far Eastern daimyo.
- Ether: Component that makes up contradiction-allowing space.
- Ether Engine: An engine that uses ether’s space-altering ability. The effect changes based on the internal crest.
- Ether Fuel: Ether that has been purified into fuel. Used as External Blessings or for ether engines.
- Ether Reactor: A reactor that extracts and purifies ether from the air. Has a lower output than a ley line reactor, but is relatively safe.
- External Blessings: Blessings accumulated outside of oneself. Ether fuel is an example.

F

- Far East: Name of the Divine States after the Harmonic Unification War.

G

- God of War: A giant humanoid machine that people combine with to move.
- Graduation: No limit for nations other than the Far East. Far Easterners must graduate at 18.

H

- Harmonic Territory: Locations where the fallen Harmonic World Divine States unified with the real world while breaking apart.

- Harmonic Unification War: A war between the harmonic world residents and the real world (Divine States) residents after the destruction of the harmonic world. The harmonic world residents won and began a provisional rule over the Divine States.
- Harmonic World: A former alternate space that copied the Divine States. Preserved through ley line control.
- Hexagone Française: Mouri clan + France.
- History Recreation: Recreating the Testament descriptions to maintain the path the world takes.

I

- Inherited Name: The name of a historical figure given to an appropriate individual for the history recreation.
- Internal Blessings: blessings stored within oneself.
- IZUMO: The Far East's largest corporation. The headquarters for Far Eastern shrines and the corporation that built the Musashi.

J

- Judge/Judgment: Means "understood". Used by criminals.

K

- K.P.A. Italia: Association of Aki States + Union of Italian City States.

L

- Ley Line: The thicker of the pathways through which ether flows.

M

- Magic: Folk spells currently under persecution in Europe.
- M.H.R.R.: Hashiba clan + Holy Roman Empires.
- Mikawa: Destroyed by the collapse of Lord Motonobu's ley line reactor.
- Mlasi: A later non-Tsirhc religion that also worships the Testament.
- Mouse: A spirit beast device to act as an intermediary between the Shinto religion and its musicians. Other religions use different names.
- Musashi: Aerial city ship. The sole independent territory allowed for the Far East.

[First Starboard Ship – Shinagawa/Second Starboard Ship – Tama/Third Starboard Ship – Takao/First Central Ship – Musashino/Back Central Ship – Okutama/First Port Ship – Asakusa/Second Port Ship – Murayama/Third Port Ship – Oume]

- Musashi Ariadust Academy: The Far East's representative academy which exists on Okutama of Musashi.
- Musician: A religion's worshiper.

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- Offering: Providing a god with something they will enjoy or Internal Blessings.
- Orei Metallo/Nero: Ore or water containing ether. Can be used as ether fuel.

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- P.A. Oda: Oda clan + Ottomans.
- Protestant: A new style of Tsirhc created to escape the corruption of Catholicism and to adjust to the new age.

R

- Religion: Organizations or groups that worship a god or the Testament.

S

- Shinto: Far Eastern religion. Worships the Far Eastern gods and uses divine music spells.
- Shirasago Enterprises: IZUMO’s shrine brand.
- Sign Frame: Spell device needed to use each religion’s basic protection.
- Spell: Causing a miracle in a certain space by processing ether.
- Student Council: The organization that handles an academy’s domestic and foreign affairs.
- Substitution: Offering something to please a god instead of using Blessings to activate a spell.

T

- Tes/Testament: Means “understood”.
- Testament: A history book that provides the history of the earth’s previous age. There are seven pairs and excerpts.
- Testament Descriptions: History of the earth’s previous age that is automatically updated by the Testament. However, it stopped updating after the description for 1648.
- Testament Union: An organization meant to lead the history recreation.
- Tres España: Oouchi and Ootomo clans + Spain. Currently

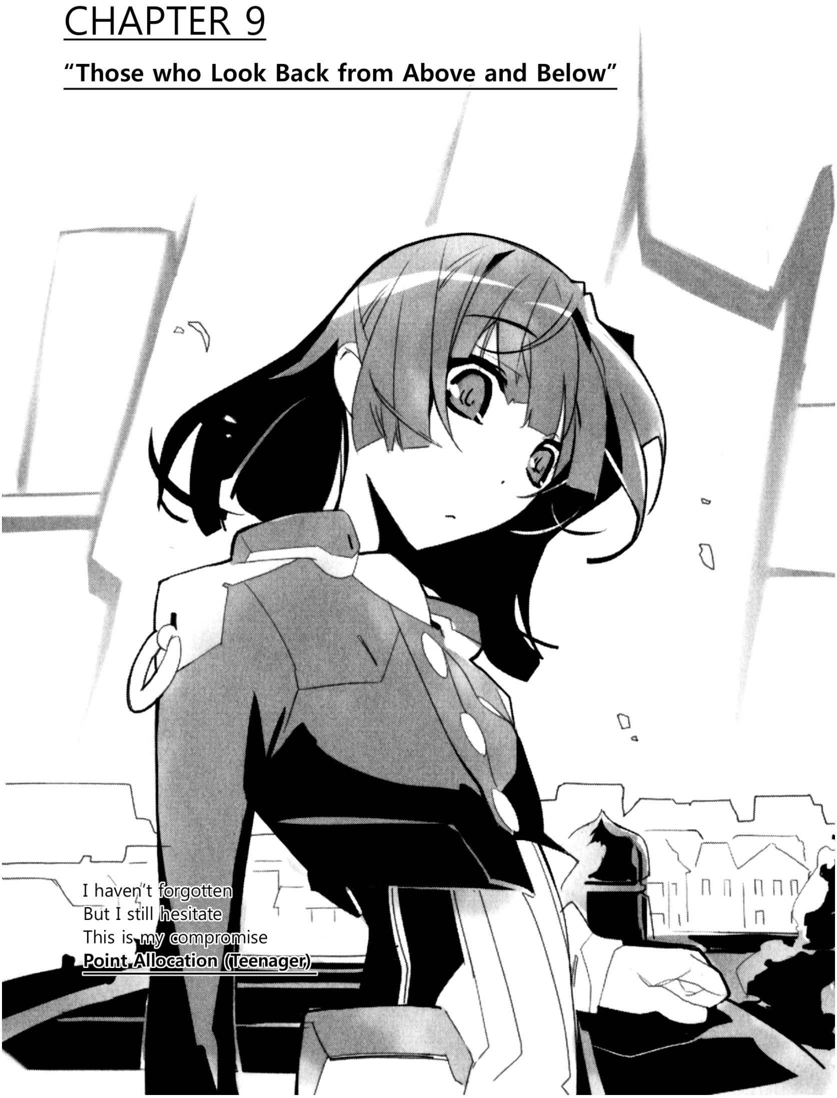
includes Portugal.
- Tsirhc: A religion which places the Son of God at the top. Worships the Testament.

Asama’s Plans

Toori: Sis! Sis! What are you and Asama going to do!?

Kimi: Heh heh heh. Well, we’re going to continue our date by eating ice cream, taking a bath, and keeping things exciting!

Chapter 9: Those who Look Back from Above and Below


CHAPTER 9
"Those who Look Back from Above and Below"
I haven't forgotten
But I still hesitate
This is my compromise
Point Allocation (Teenager)

I haven't forgotten

But I still hesitate

This is my compromise

Point Allocation (Teenager)

A silk-like color gradually began to fill the white sky.

The aerial city ship Musashi had three ships on the left and right and two ships in the center. The color came from the setting sun faintly showing through the stealth barrier surrounding the giant city ship.

That sky informed the residents that the afternoon was coming to an end. Girls’ voices came from the ship surrounded by that cream coloration.

First, it was just one. It came from the stairs leading down into the atrium park at the center of the second port ship.

“We’re still in people’s living space, but I like that we can keep the stealth lower when we’re over the ocean. It has to be so solid over land that it all looks pure white. …That may not matter to Kimi, but do you manage the barrier for the Asama Shrine, Tomo?”

The question was asked of a tall black-haired girl.

“Well,” she began while looking into the sky with her green left eye and light brown right eye. “For the barriers, I check over the technical side and manage the spare pool of power, so I don’t get much work on the weaker days like this. But as you said, Mito, the residents of Musashi like this sky and they sometimes request that we search out places that allow for the weaker stealth when we’re taking a coastal route.”

“Oh?” said a dancing girl with long brown hair. She held the black-haired girl’s left arm and looked into the sky with the other two. “Heh heh. This way reduces the stealth fuel cost and sometimes it can be removed altogether. The guests from outside probably like it too.”

Meanwhile, they descended the stairs and the sky grew narrower inside the atrium. The cut-out of cream-colored barrier flowed by and they instead saw the trees down below.

“Now, this is our next destination: Murayama’s central atrium park."

A girl moved forward while pulling on the black-haired girl's hand. She had silver hair and a three-headed wolf on her head.

"This is the main destination of today's date. Right, Tomo?"

Asama came to a stop when she heard Mitotsudaira.

…Today's d-date!?

Her heart was filled with unease about the unknown and anxiety about not knowing what to do.

She knew she only had to ask Kimi and Mitotsudaira about anything she did not know, but if she did that…

…They might decide my date wasn't up to snuff and refuse to form a band with me.

So I need to do my best, she thought. *Forcing myself a little bit might show them how passionate I am about this.*

"…Yes."

She took a step forward while tugging on Mitotsudaira who held her left hand and on Kimi who embraced her right arm. She descended the stairs and entered the nature park that reached three floors down and covered two wide blocks.

And…

"Ah."

A few sign frames appeared around her.

They were security related.

She saw Hanami erasing them all and Kimi smiled bitterly in response. She looked back and forth between Asama and the sign frames.

"You don't visit places like this often, so your security went off, didn't it?"

"After the Non-God Dragon yesterday, I changed my security settings for densely populated areas. A lot of management privileges end up with me, so while it's a pain, a lot more has to be checked back over by someone with the proper privileges. Just look."

She grabbed one sign frame and showed it off.

<Your defense management you created is good for you and good for everyone. You can approve it with your own approach for how you will authorize your settings, you. What will you do from your heart when you see that? (You will authorize it in your own way) (You will not)>

"Is that a zen dialogue or something?"

"No, the IZUMO-made OS just isn't compatible, but IZUMO tends to keep adding things on without fixing it… Oh, Mito and Kimi. After yesterday, I installed an additional defensive divine protection for you, so check on that when you have time, okay?"

After saying that with a smile, Asama realized something.

…I-I entered technician mode again!!

Her smile froze on her face, but the Cerberus on Mitotsudaira's head barked once. She looked toward it and saw three torii-style sign frames above its small heads.

Mitotsudaira smiled bitterly toward the sign frames that opened overhead and besides her face.

"You gave my Cerberus divine protections too?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. It would have been caught by security here and there if I didn't do anything, so I gave it some as a Mouse after the battle yesterday."

The divine protection OS had little experience, but it must have been drawn out by Asama's authorization check. She had made sure it could view Mitotsudaira's authorization history, but it likely saw Asama as the higher authority.

So Asama quickly sent Mitotsudaira the transfer of authority.

After Mitotsudaira approved it, the sign frames around them and the Cerberus vanished.

"I know the situation, Mito, so you won't have sign frames appearing all over the place everywhere you go. Even if you go to a Catholic or Protestant facility outside the Asama system, you can set a protection key on your own there, so you can take it wherever you want."

"Judge."

Mitotsudaira nodded and the Cerberus barked.

Hanami bowed and Uzy climbed onto Kimi's head to raise a hand toward the Cerberus.

What an adorable scene, thought Asama, but…

…I-I just showed off my technical skills again!!

This was frightening. This was definitely the gift…no, the curse of working and advertising for the Asama Shrine for so many years.

As she wondered what to do, Kimi pulled on her arm.

"C'mon."

Kimi used her chin to gesture ahead toward a food stand.

There was not a long line, but there were always a few people there.

"That's the ice cream stand we were after. Now, what shall *I* get?"

Mitotsudaira pulled on Asama's hand.

She took a breath in the short line.

Asama also took a breath, but she grew a little tense.

It was not visibly apparent, but Mitotsudaira noticed the change in the hand she held.

Part of it had to do with lining up for a shop like this, but…

"This is your first time eating ice cream, isn't it?"

"Eh?"

Asama lowered her eyebrows and smiled a little.

“Yes. I missed my chance to eat some a long time ago…and I’ve never had any since.”

“Is that so?” replied Mitotsudaira with a nod.

There was probably more to this. And Asama’s lifestyle had made it clear she was not used to lining up at shops like this. After all….

“Tomo, you don’t carry a wallet, do you?”

When Mitotsudaira brought that up to change the subject, Asama raised her eyebrows and smiled again.

“That’s right… Yes, losing my wallet would be a pain and the bartering stores are owned by Shinto musicians, so I can get by with intermediary substitutions.”

That meant she lived a life completely removed from physical money. Because a wallet was directly linked to status for a noble or merchant, not even the rich would live a wallet-less life. Visibly paying with a stack of cash or pile of coins helped show off their social status.

Asama had a reason for not doing that.

…As a shrine maiden, she wants to eliminate any obligation to others or anything that could become a source of impurity.

That was of course not the only reason.

After all, she was in a position where she did not have to worry about money.

…She’s part of a major Shinto shrine and she manages things on the Musashi.

Mitotsudaira used her friend to ponder one part of the world.

Shinto was the sole existence that managed the infrastructure of the entire Far East.

Shinto was an international corporation that supported both the history recreation and the provisional rule.

Mitotsudaira had not really thought about it at the beginning of middle school, but now that she was involved in the Knights League and the Chancellor's Officers, she understood what that meant.

Shinto was very important to the various nations that resided in the Far East through the provisional rule.

“Mito, is something the matter?”

“No,” she replied while looking to Asama and seeing the usual smile on her face.

Some people who saw that girl might think she did not want for anything.

…*That's true.*

Even Mitotsudaira did not see any real inconvenience in Asama's lifestyle.

She cooked for herself, but the lunchboxes she made for herself or others like Kimi used ingredients from Musashi and her clothing was not at all worn out.

As for money, she had the costs of her work and a monthly allowance from her father, but since that was “for others”, she would discuss it with her father and there was no real limit to it when it was necessary. Of course, the Asama Shrine was not a merchant, so they did not use money to solve all their problems.

That was how Asama had decided to manage her limitless self.

Mitotsudaira viewed her as refined rather than arrogant.

Also, Asama was not simply given those things.

She had been given a role and she did her work.

She managed the Musashi and she was responsible for Shinto.

She had performed Shinto rituals and managed the Musashi's divine transmissions and ether pathways since elementary school. The latter often introduced issues without warning, so her everyday life was tied to the Musashi.

Her position as the #2 at the Asama Shrine made her an active worker on the Musashi.

A lot of that was reduced thanks to Hanami, her Mouse, but she sought restraints and rules far more than Mitotsudaira did.

Mitotsudaira was impressed she could waste time with her and Kimi, but…

…Her father is working hard too.

Mitotsudaira occasionally saw Asama's father.

He would appear on the mail-order infomercials for the Asama Shrine and speak with an odd intonation.

"And now for today's f-e-a-t-u-r-e-d i-t-e-m!"

The elementary school children often mimicked it as a joke.

Mitotsudaira wondered how Asama had the time, but since Kimi or the others often helped with the ad filming, her father probably reduced the burden to help his daughter get along with her friends.

Mitotsudaira remembered helping with that filming the other day. She had suddenly found herself reading off the benefits of the Asama Shrine's spring, but she had felt a year-long free pass to the members-only spring was a bit much for payment.

That said, there was a clear burden on Asama too.

Her mother had already passed away.

Mitotsudaira had seen the woman just once back in elementary school. She had looked like Asama did now, and…

"————"

She did have giant breasts. No, maybe that's true of any mother. Yes, take my mother for exam-…no, I have a feeling she was extraordinary from the beginning. Heh heh. Why am I stretching my back and looking up into the sky? Heh heh, heh heh heh…

"Mito! Mito! Why are you hanging your head!?"

"It's nothing…"

She raised her head and looked to her friend, but the girl was the same as always.

The usual smile came from the usual height.

It was the same girl who still did not want for anything.

She had a number of burdens and she diligently followed her own rules, but…

"Tomo."

She had suddenly said she wanted to start a band and now she was here to eat ice cream.

However, Mitotsudaira could not yet say the girl had changed a lot.

Was she trying to change? Or was she just trying this out?

…Surely she isn't just trying to deal with some stress.

Mitotsudaira hung her head in her heart, but she still opened her mouth.

She felt certain that Asama wanted to continue her days like normal, but…

…She wants to perceive it as something else.

So she spoke.

"Do you know how to order ice cream? I can tell you how if necessary."

…How to order it!?

There's a special way of doing that? thought Asama with a gulp.

She hesitated for a second, but she used not lying as a substitution and there was no point in using this to test what qualified as a violation. The girls on her left and right were used to this sort of place, so she asked them.

"How do you order it? Do you have to recite a prayer of receiving!?"

"Heh heh heh. That isn't necessary, Asama. Listen. I'll start with the very basics. The thing about ice cream is, it comes as a stick or in a cup. The stick is made nice and hard so it's perfect for sucking on and the cup is filled with plenty of milky stuff so you can lick it all over. You have to choose one or the other."

"I get the feeling you're trying to trick me, Kimi."

"Oh, c'mon. I'm doing nothing of the sort. Oh, but…"

"What?"

"Judge." The idiot sister gave her a serious look. "There are also the cones filled with thick white stuff! The round balls are at one end and you grab the cone in your hand, but you have to work quick before the white stuff leaks out of the tip! Well? Interested!? You are, aren't you!? Yes, Asama, you're already a slave to ice cream. Feel free to lick it and suck on it as much as you want! Now, imagine this finger is one of the sticks and suck it! Nn, it's so tasty even doing it to myself! The juices from the lunch you made me are still under the fingernail, so it tastes like roast pork! Like pork! Well!?"

"Mito, my hands are full, so you can punch her for me."

"Yes! Do it! Punch me kindly like a pig!! Roast!!"

Mitotsudaira answered that carnivorous cry with a refreshing smile and then she nodded.

"My dominant hand is full."

You're going with that? thought Asama as the crazy person to her right smiled at her.

"Okay, Asama, are you listening?"

"There's more?"

"Yes. After all, I only told you the basics. Do you want to hear the real lesson now!?"

"Not really."

"You do!? Then I'll have to tell you greatest secret right away!"

"Why?"

Kimi sighed and brought her lips to Asama's ear.

"You know what?"

Mitotsudaira watched Kimi whisper something to Asama.

…*What is this?*

The half-werewolf could not make out what Kimi was saying, but she did pick up a very familiar name.

…*My king?*

Their turn for ice cream arrived as she wondered what that was about.

And then Asama suddenly spoke up.

"Um, Mito?"

"Eh? Wh-what is it?"

She looked back and Asama nodded while smiling with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

"I think I'll pass on the ice cream…"

"___________"

Mitotsudaira knew what that meant. Since she would not be getting any ice cream, she was leaving things here to Mitotsudaira.

But…

…*What is this?*

It was likely related to what Kimi had said, but what had that been?

"Kimi?"

She looked over and saw Kimi apologetically holding out a hand, but she quickly formed a smile with lowered eyebrows.

"Treat meeee."

"A-are you trying to sponge off of me!?"

Nevertheless, it was their turn, so Mitotsudaira hesitated, but…

…She must have a reason.

Mitotsudaira had a lot of things like that herself and she had only made it this far from the support, protection, and provocation of Asama and the others.

No matter how small a thing it had been, she would never forget it.

So she faced forward and spoke to the shop owner past the counter.

"Can you put it all in a bucket? We'll have the chocolate mint, the soy sauce, the caramel, and…what do you recommend?"

"Judge! I recommend the 'little girl's handmade honey' flavor, Mitotsudaira-kun!"

"Why are you here, Ohiroshiki!?"

Mitotsudaira looked forward without stopping the Cerberus from barking atop her head.

…What is Ohiroshiki doing here?

Ohiroshiki responded while adjusting his eboshi-style chef's hat, placing his wrists on his hips, and puffing his chest out proudly.

"Of course I'm here. This is a store I am financing! I have complete control over how it is run! After all, ice cream lets me come up with any flavors that come to mind, so it's just so much fun! And there are lots of little girls! As you can see, there is nothing to complain about."

"Someone else! I demand someone else serves me! Are you saying this store is affiliated with the Ohiroshiki name!?"

"Heh heh heh." With practiced motions, Ohiroshiki scooped ice cream into a bucket of waterproof Far Eastern paper. "How do you like those perfect ice cream scooping motions I've developed to live up to the little girls' expectant gazes!? It was worth practicing late into the night with a bucket of iron sand and hurting my wrist, wasn't it?"

"If all you did was hurt it, you didn't train anything, did you?"

"Now, now," he said before Kimi's voice reached them.

She did not even bother hiding the disinterest in her tone.

“Is anyone else working there?”

“Judge. I generally don’t answer the questions of anyone older than ten because it will make my heart rot, but Suga-san won’t be here until later today.”

“The Vice Chancellor?”

“Judge. The Vice Chancellor must like cute things too because whenever he sees a girl or a couple, he suddenly starts muttering a poem, so he seems to like working here. But his faith is different from mine, so we sometimes end up giving each other looks of scorn.”

“I see…”

While Mitotsudaira felt dumbfounded by this unknown side of the Vice Chancellor, Asama gave a nod of understanding.

…She must know something.

But Mitotsudaira had her own questions. The Vice Chancellor would be paid a fair amount for his daily expenses and training, but if he was working on top of that…

“Why does the Vice Chancellor work? Is it to fulfill some kind of hobby?”

“Well…” Ohiroshiki seemed to hesitate but then he nodded. “It’s for the future.”

“For the future?”

“Judge.” Ohiroshiki nodded again. “Suga-san’s teacher is wandering around down below, so he’s saving up the funds needed to train as an apprentice down there.”

Asama sensed something special in the term “down below”. After all…

…That refers to the Far Eastern mainland…

She rarely left the Musashi because of her management of the

Musashi and everyone's contracts. That unmoving earth held a special feeling as the place they were originally meant to live.

Mitotsudaira and Kimi were likely the same.

"But it isn't easy for a Musashi resident to live down there, is it?"

All the different nations were crammed into the limited space there, moving between nations required undergoing an inspection, there were wars, and there were external enemies such as wild beasts and mysterious phenomena.

But…

…If you're training, it makes sense to go somewhere dangerous like that.

Of course, even on the surface, the major roads and water sources were maintained by Shinto shrines and people would be just as safe as on the Musashi if they travelled on the major roads and stayed in the cities along those roads. There were Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples set up as refuges, so a Far Easterner could travel around the Far East in relative peace.

Every nation used the Shinto network and roads for their international trade and divine transmissions, so stable travel was generally possible along those major roads.

But…

…There are wars based on the history recreation, there are mysterious phenomena, and there are all sorts of restrictions.

The surface was under the provisional rule of the other nations. There were tolls only Far Easterners had to pay and they were often restricted or banned from using certain facilities.

Asama's position in Shinto allowed her to overcome those restrictions, but…

"The Vice Chancellor has trouble with divine spells, doesn't he? Having general upper-level authority as a Shinto worker would make him a Shinto technician and make it easier to move to and from the surface."

"He's entirely the athletic type," said Mitotsudaira.

What they had heard here and the fact that he wrote song lyrics suggested he was actually more the literary type, but Asama decided not to look into it. But…

“Our upperclassmen are already thinking about after graduation.”

“Judge,” said Ohiroshiki. “From what I’ve heard, 1st Special Duty Officer Watanabe was taught by the same person as Suga-san, so she’s apparently going down below too.”

This was all new information.

I see, thought Asama as Ohiroshiki handed the Far Eastern paper bucket to Mitotsudaira.

“Anyway, here you go. I’ll throw in some drinks on the house, so make sure you tell all the little girls about this place. Got that? I’m counting on you. Make sure you do it.”

“We’ll search out some anti-elders. A-also, I’ll take one more thing.”

Mitotudaira sighed and took the bucket.

Then she smiled toward Asama.

“There’s a table over there, so let’s go there. Let’s take a break until twilight.”

“Okay.”

Asama nodded back and felt bad for backing out of the ice cream when she had been the one to plan it for their date. So…

“Um, I’ll go make some adjustments to this park and the surroundings using the information torii over there, so go eat the ice cream without me.”

“Heh heh. You can’t eat it, but are you afraid you’ll reach for it when it looks so good as we eat it in front of you?”

“Th-that is not it.”

Asama knew she was trying to help, so she raised her eyebrows toward Kimi.

“I can eat anything if it’s purified first. …I make a point of eating what I want by finding loopholes in my restrictions.”

“So what do you plan to do from now on, Masazumi? We ran into each other by chance, so how about we get something to eat?”

“No, I have an interview for a part-time job and I need to pick up some paperwork for my dad’s job, Augesvarer. Don’t worry about me. Besides, I don’t like feeling indebted to others.”

Masazumi, a black-haired girl in a boy’s uniform, held a paper bag on a terrace. She occasionally twisted her shoulders as if checking how the uniform fit.

“There isn’t any real reason to stay with me.”

“Don’t lie. That interview will be with one of the Provisional Councilors, won’t it?”

“No, it’s with the Musashino elementary school.”

“What?” replied Heidi. “Don’t you want to be a politician? Your dad’s one of the Provisional Councilors, so go make some connections! And then introduce your merchant friends to those happy connections! We can support each other’s futures.”

“Is not even trying to hide your ulterior motive the Musashi way?”

“Maybe,” she said with a smile.

Masazumi did not hesitate to glare at her as she continued on. She was crossing a bridge over an atrium park. To move from the port side of the port ship of Murayama to the central ship of Musashino, the bridge was faster than going around Murayama’s central atrium park.

She walked along the terrace railing and turned back toward Heidi who was following her.

“Don’t you two have work to do?”

“Eh? We are doing work. This is the time for Erimaki’s patrol, so I’m outside and Shiro-kun’s in the office.”

“What do you mean?”

“Um, I’m a mobile relay station. I send-…”

As she explained, a white fox appeared from Heidi's neck hard point part. It moved up onto her head and raised its front right paw toward Masazumi.

"Oh?"

Confused, Masazumi raised her right hand back and a sign frame appeared in that hand.

It was a vermilion sign frame that displayed the name Marube-ya and an address. Erimaki's face and the text "Next Year's Treasurer Candidate" danced around inside it. But…

"Ah."

The sign frame shattered in her hand.

"Eh?" Heidi spread her mouth horizontally and then added an "Oh."

She left Erimaki to tilt its head on top of her head.

"Masazumi, you aren't entirely registered with Musashi's shrine, are you?"

"Asama recommended it, but it requires periodic payments and I'd run out of money."

"Is your dad strict?"

"He'll pay for the bare minimum of clothing, food, and housing, but he tells me to pay for my own tuition and such."

"That's pretty normal then."

"Right?" Masazumi lowered her head. "The people of Musashi are just too good at supporting themselves."

"Do you have a handheld shrine?"

"I borrow my dad's when I need one."

"When is that?"

"Judge." Masazumi nodded. "When he's having a meeting at home in the evening, he'll have me leave for about two hours to eat out and do whatever else. He always asks me to call him before heading back home. And when I do get home, everyone's about to leave, so I only get a quick glimpse of them.”

“He sounds pretty conservative.”

As Heidi said that, Erimaki looked around atop her head. Sign frames started appearing around the Mouse and Heidi shrunk them down.

“Is Asama-chi assisting you?”

“She’s put together a variable protection that gives me what I need plus what my budget can afford.”

“Yeah, she’ll worry, but she won’t give out any more than absolutely necessary. But next time she calls for you, it’ll really be necessary, so you should probably listen.”

“The heir to the Asama Shrine, huh?”

Masazumi looked up into the sky.

Not even a month had passed since Masazumi had moved from Mikawa to Musashi.

She had originally been in Mikawa.

…But my mother fell victim to the spiriting away known as the Princess Disappearances.

Her only relative had been her father who had moved to Musashi on his own about ten years before.

Thanks to Lord Motonobu sending everyone away, Mikawa’s central roles had been filled by automatons. That had also prevented her from receiving her name of Honda Masazumi as an inherited name. And that failure had led to her sex change operations being stopped partway through.

…There wasn’t any more reason to stay in Mikawa.

It had been a month since she had decided to change homes.

She had finally gotten used to her strict father’s personality and way of saying things and she had come to understand that came from the harsh world of the Provisional Council he belonged to. And before that…

“Asama was a lot of help.”

When she had boarded the Musashi, Asama had performed the quarantine, divine transmission, and temporary shrine registration for her.

She had not been able to use the automatic processing and no one else had come to manage her contract because she already had a class to transfer into and one of the Provisional Councilors was her father.

Asama had met her in her shrine maiden uniform, so Masazumi had thought the girl was older than her. She had never expected the girl to be waving at her when she entered the classroom that first time.

It had been more than just a surprise.

The Asama Shrine was the Musashi’s contact point with IZUMO, head of Shinto, so it could be seen as a necessary part of the ship’s functionality.

Asama herself managed all that, so she was on the level of a cabinet minister in politician terms.

As the daughter of a Provisional Councilor, she had been nervous enough knowing in advance someone like that would be in her class, but it was all the worse discovering it was the shrine maiden who had handled her arrival on the ship.

She could tell it had shaken her because no one had laughed at the light gag she had prepared in advance.

…I eventually need to wipe away that cold silence and scattered applause.

During that initial period, the ones who had acted as intermediaries by showing her around the classroom and introducing her to the class had been Asama, Augesvarer, the Aoi Siblings, Naito…

…No, maybe I should say it was all of them.

Thanks to that, she was now in a position where either one of them felt comfortable asking for help if something happened. That tended to be whether to go along with the Aoi idiot’s ideas and she always declined, but they would all smile when she brought up rules and laws to explain her decision.

They would just say "How refreshing…" and she was not quite sure how to deal with it.

But now that she thought about it, Asama was on the Public Morals Committee and she was the #2 of the Asama Shrine, so she tended to join Masazumi on the supervision side of things.

It was a strange place.

If it just had some stupid people, then it would just be a stupid place, but when there were people with actual authority and responsibilities there too, she could only describe it as chaotic.

…Honestly.

She was still bewildered by the Musashi's atmosphere.

"Augesvarer," she said while crossing the bridge over the atrium park. "I think the class's sense of distance is very strange."

As she spoke, she faced the atrium park rather than the merchant.

Down below, there were three people walking in the nature park dyed in the colors of evening.

"Huh? That's Asama-chi, Mito, and Kimi-chan. This smells lucrative. Oh, but what's this?"

"What's what?"

"Judge." Augesvarer continued watching the three down below while following Masazumi. "I thought Asama-chi couldn't eat ice cream? Did she find some kind of excuse or interpretation?"

"Because of a substitution?"

"No, not that."

Augesvarer held up her right palm while walking alongside Masazumi.

Masazumi knew what that meant, so…

"I don't have any money."

“Don’t you want some information? It’s related to an important part of Asama-chi’s past.”

“Then I’ll choose not to ask as a sign of trust I can use in some future negotiations.”

“You are the worst.”

The merchant spread her mouth horizontally, but Masazumi sped up her pace toward the interview. Down below, Asama stood in front of a park information torii and opened a sign frame. She may have been adjusting something.

The Aoi Sister and Mitotsudaira stood a little away. They were eating ice cream from a bucket using wafer spoons, but Asama showed no sign of eating any. And it seemed to be more than just being too busy with whatever she was working on.

“There’s a reason for that, isn’t there? I don’t know much about Asama, but she must have promised someone she wouldn’t eat ice cream.”

“Who do you think it was with?”

“One of the Aoi Siblings, if not both. A month was enough time to figure out who she’s closest with.”

Even if this was Asama, the #2 of the Asama Shrine…

“It’s strange that she would be keeping a promise not to eat ice cream.”

“I…see. So that’s what happened.”

Mitotsudaira looked at Asama’s somewhat distant back while Kimi nodded.

Asama was going through all the privileged settings on the information torii and she did not seem able to hear what the other two were saying. That was not exactly why, but Kimi smiled a little and spoke.

“Whenever I think she’s forgotten something so she can be more carefree, she always gets so serious in the very end. Even if I hadn’t said anything, I bet she would have backed out of eating it when it came down to it."

"That's just who Tomo is. But I had no idea she promised that."

"It was less of a promise and more of a unilateral announcement," said Kimi. "That's probably why it hasn't turned out like her substitution restrictions."

She looked up into the evening colors of the stealth barrier sky.

"Long ago, a stupid boy invited a serious girl to a festival. But the serious girl rejected the invitation because she had to help with the festival. Even so, the boy found the girl at the end of the festival and wandered around the festival with her. But…"

"Most of the stands had already closed?"

"Judge." Kimi smiled bitterly. "But luckily, an ice cream stand was still open and they took a break there. However, the girl was rich, but she had no change with her. And since it was something she had never eaten before, she decided not to get any. So the boy bought some for her as well and more or less forced her to take it, but…"

"What happened?"

"The girl wasn't used to it and the ice cream fell right out of the cone."

"__________"

Mitotsudaira fell silent and Kimi smiled over at her.

"It could easily have looked like she tried to refuse, had it forced onto her, and threw it away, so the girl desperately apologized. But the boy saw things a little differently."

"Differently?"

The "boy" she knew would never allow something like that. So…

"Just what *awful thing* did he do?"

"It's simple. He forced the girl to take his ice cream…and he tried to eat the ice cream that had fallen to the ground. He said it would be fine, since it would have been purified if it fell from her hands."

He really hasn't changed, thought Mitotsudaira, but if she accepted Kimi's story at face value, there was a contradiction. After all…

"Tomo has never eaten ice cream, right? Then what happened to the new ice cream he made her take? Who ate that?"

"A clever girl ate it. After all, the girl stopped the boy from eating the ice cream off the ground and she refused to eat the ice cream she had when he didn't have any. …So a clever girl saw through all that and settled the issue by eating the ice cream no one could eat. Oh, I forgot to mention it, but because that girl had decided not to buy her own ice cream, the boy had treated everyone there to ice cream."

She hasn't changed either, thought Mitotsudaira, but Kimi sighed and continued.

"The boy asked the girl to treat him to ice cream next time and to buy some for herself at the same time. The girl replied by saying she would refrain from eating ice cream until then."

Kimi gave Asama's distant back an exasperated look.

"It isn't something she would normally eat, so she never had a good chance, everyone grew up, and the promise was never resolved. And the girl is probably hesitant to bring it up after all this time because he might have forgotten."

"I doubt he's forgotten."

"Heh heh. True. That's why you keep glancing over at your king from your path to knighthood and get so angry when you wonder if he's forgotten. …And that anger comes from the fact that you really don't think he's forgotten."

But…

"Any guess I make about what's going on in that girl's mind is no better than fortune-telling. But just as I thought she might have changed recently, it turns out she hasn't at all and that's just lovely. After all…"

After all…

"I also doubt that boy has forgotten."

“I see.” Mitotsudaira nodded as the Cerberus lowered its heads a little on her head. “Inviting her here was a mistake.”

“Heh heh. If I thought that, I would have stopped it. This was a good thing. We’re all changing, so it’s good to figure out what’s holding us back and what we should protect. It’s far better than realizing much later that you haven’t changed at all.”

“Those are the words of someone who believes change is a good thing, you know?”

Change was not necessarily “good”. Mitotsudaira knew that after her wild past.

“You can change in a bad way too.”

“Oh, dear. Are you trying to keep that excellent ending all to yourself, Miss Knight?”

Kimi glanced over at her and placed a hand on her mouth.

“Transforming a bad change into good fortune is one form of purification in Shinto. If you purify a corpse or impure blood, they can be reborn as a new god. And if you store a corpse or impure objects as your god tells you, they can change into gold bars and other treasures before you know it. …Are you not going to tell anyone else how a wild wolf became a knight?”

“Not – a – chance.”

That was the relationship between a king and a knight. Others had nothing to do with it and it would only be a story to anyone but a knight.

…And in my case…

It had not remained bad.

As if to say they would not let that happen, someone had dragged her back and everyone had supported her.

In that case…

“This here must be a case of give-and-take as well.”

“Heh heh heh. You need to at least let your eyes sparkle like a dog as you shout ‘and this time, it’s our turn to support her!’ ”

“I have not returned that far. …After all, I have yet to fulfill my duty as a knight.”

“Judge. That’s right. You still haven’t rolled onto our back so he can rub your belly, let him brush your hair, or sat down so he can feed you.”

“I am not a dog.”

The Cerberus on her head barked as she said that and then Asama came back.

Her step was light and the weights Mitotsudaira had groped that morning were bouncing.

…Oh, they move left and right more than I would have thought.

Mitotsudaira felt like she had seen a lot of vertical bouncing among the Far Eastern students, but now that she was focusing on it thanks to that morning…

…Not many people can pull off that horizontal bouncing as well.

She wondered if Asama was using the movable range of the hard points on the sides of her chest. Mitotsudaira herself did not perform much maintenance on that, but…

“Tomo, how often do you perform maintenance on your chest hard points?”

“Eh? Mito, do you want to join the hard point leasing service the shrine offers? You get to exchange them for the latest Shirasago model every three months.”

“Exchange them? Every three months?”

“Yes. They get worn out so quickly even with maintenance. And since I have work to do, I’m extra careful and get new ones every two months. You swap yours out for the top model every half year, right? Do you put them through a lot of wear and tear in your knight training?”

I can’t tell her, thought Mitotsudaira.

…I can't tell her I only get new ones for a tax credit, not because they get worn out.

She recalled that her mother got new ones quite frequently. As a child, she had once asked how to get breasts as big as her mother's:

"Heh heh. If you put motors in the hard points so they can do a 'press together and lift' exercise, you can make someone very happy."

"How does that make them happy?"

"Testament. It nearly brings your father to tears. Yes, and I just added in that exercise to make your father happy, so I think I'll go test it out."

For a while afterwards, she had heard her father screaming from the farm-management shed.

…What in the world was my mother doing in the middle of the day? And father, please put up more of a fight…no, I guess that wouldn't be possible…

However, lamenting the reality of their uneven society would get her nowhere. *Change. Yes, I need to believe change is for the best and continue with those "press together and lift" exercises.*

And…

"Um, Tomo?"

"Eh?"

She knew about the ice cream now, so she thought about telling Asama. But…

"Asama, Mitotsudaira wants to know why you won't eat ice cream."

…Eh?

Kimi had already told her most of it, so why would Kimi ask to have her told again?

A look of confusion came to Asama as she arrived in front of them.

She seemed to hesitate a bit, but then she smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

"Well…"

It was not good for a Shinto shrine maiden to not know what to say. Asama would know that, so after her initial hesitation, she spoke clearly.

"It wasn't really a promise, but something happened a long time ago."

Namely…

"My clumsiness kept me from eating ice cream and that was something someone had bought for me…"

Asama looked Mitotsudaira in the eye.

She took a breath and seemed to entrust her words to the other girl.

"So I thought I could buy some for him next time…but I don't eat ice cream at the shrine and it just never really happened."

"Tomo?"

The words were different, but it was the same story Kimi had told.

But Asama made it sound so impersonal.

"You're just like me," said Mitotsudaira.

"Eh?"

Asama responded with confusion, but that gave Mitotsudaira a thought.

…*That settles it.*

Asama tended to look after others. She was a shrine maiden, she came from a well-off family, she was tall, and everyone had always relied on her like she was the oldest.

She was aware of all that and she tried to make sure she did not worry anyone else.

That made her blunt and impersonal when it came to herself, so…

…*This isn't normal.*

Normally, she would not have mentioned something from the past that worried her. She would have avoided the issue by saying everything was fine and Mitotsudaira did not need to worry.

Especially when it was a memory from the past that Mitotsudaira did not share.

That was different.

She was different from normal.

She had talked about it.

And Mitotsudaira had noticed this was not the usual Asama.

So…

"Tomo."

Asama had been confused when Mitotsudaira had pointed out she was different from normal.

It was a strange series of events.

Asama had likely expected Mitotsudaira would respond with an impersonal "Is that so?" and treat it like it was unimportant, but…

"It's okay."

She understood why Kimi had told her about it ahead of time.

That had allowed her to see *her own past* in that story.

And that had allowed her to not respond with an impersonal "Is that so?"

Honestly.

Those siblings are so difficult to deal with. You think they've set up some kind of roundabout trap, but then they catch you by surprise and you realize it all had a meaning. I should really thank Kimi right now, but…

"__________"

The idiot sister was giving her a serious look while shaking her breasts horizontally and Uzy held up a sign frame that said "new ones every two months."

… Do I want to punch her because I'm lacking in humanity? Is that it?

But the one she needed to speak to now was Asama.

"Then the two of us can eat this ice cream to help you keep that very, very important promise from your past?"

"Eh? Oh, um, no…but, well, uh, I guess so."

Seeing Asama blush and grow flustered was a rare sight. What in the world ever happened to being impersonal?

But…

"Tomo, this is an artifact that will protect your past."

Mitotsudaira handed Asama a wrapped item she held next to the bucket.

"That ice cream stand sold crepes too. It has cream and fruit inside and you've never had anything like it before, have you?"

"…Ah."

Asama's eyes briefly widened as she took it.

"Ah," she said again. "It's warm."

"It was only just made."

"That's right." Kimi moved next to Asama and grabbed her arm. "We couldn't take your ice cream virginity, but we'll be taking your crepe virginity."

"Eh? But, um, 'take'?"

"Ohiroshiki added it on as an extra, so there's just the one." Mitotsudaira narrowed her eyes to urge the shrine maiden on. "Now, how about we go to Suzu's bathhouse? And how about you take the first bite on the way? We can feed it to you since your hands are full. Hesitate too much and this opportunity might never come again, so go ahead and take that tastiest bite."

Chapter 10: Girl Soaking in the Tub

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“Girl Soaking in the Tub”

Relaxation
Is the beginning of depth
Point Allocation (Time to Think)

Relaxation

Is the beginning of depth

Point Allocation (Time to Think)

Suzu worked in the heat.

She was working in the washing area of her family's bathhouse.

The bathhouse opened for afternoon business at four o'clock, but there were already some customers there.

The women's bath of a Musashi bathhouse had peak hours at…

…Three times a day.

The first was the preparation time just before dinner. Dinner was at about six on the Musashi, so housewives and other female customers showed up from four to five to prepare for that. That group tended to be the wealthy class that had automated their cooking with spells or machines, so they were excellent customers who bought accessories for the bath and drinks for a break afterwards.

And…

…The second peak is from six to eight.

It started with the group getting off work. Next, the families would arrive after finishing dinner. This was the greatest peak and their busiest time of day.

The last peak was from night to late night when full shifts of the engine division workers and other workers who did not get breaks would show up. They needed a permit to ignore the curfew, but Suzu's family's bathhouse met the business conditions and they had a recommendation from the Asama Shrine. Thanks to that, Naomasa and the other female engine division workers often stopped by.

That was the general flow of business here. Or to put it another way…

…W-we're busy?

She could not say for sure since she did not know how busy other places were, but it was currently the second afternoon peak and the people getting off work would be showing up soon. Also…

"Ga-chan, Go-chan. You're early…today…"

“Yeah. We had a lot happen today.”

Naruze replied to Suzu as she hung her head and rested her elbows on the edge of the bath.

Suzu stacked up the washing area buckets on the right.

“It must be…tough.”

Without asking for details, Suzu gathered up the disposable scrubbing bags that had been discarded. The algae creatures in charge of the bathhouse were already cleaning the corners and walls of the washing area with the rice-bran of the scrubbing bags inside them. From what Naruze could see…

…Those are white algae…or rather, cream algae creatures.

Meanwhile, Suzu stuck a hand in the bath and expressed her satisfaction.

The bath temperature would drop as the number of customers increased. Most Musashi bathhouses used direct rather than circulatory heating, so they heated easily but the temperature was difficult to control. Naruze did like the gentler heat of the circulatory type, but she preferred letting herself be shaken by the heat of the direct type. Water heated by the “bath heater” was rising from between the floor panels at the bottom of the bath, so gradations of heat struck her body. She took up a spot above one of those lines and let it shake her body as she hung her head.

“Nn.”

She could tell the heat was wiping across the contours of her body. When she was exhausted, she would force herself onto her back, let her wings sink down, and have the heat wash over her back and hips. She loved the ticklish sensation of the hot water warming her wings.

But…

…It’s true I don’t have to worry as much with the circulatory ones.

Winged races would naturally lose some feathers in the bath. Especially when the seasons were changing.

With circulatory heating, she just had to take up a position near where the water left the bath, but with direct heating, the water welling up from below tended to spread the feathers across the bath. They would then gather in the corners and along the edges, so to sum up…

…It's amazing I can look Suzu in the eye when she has to clean it all up.

"You look happy, Suzu."

"Yeah."

Suzu wore a swimsuit. It bore the logo of the Asama Shrine that funded the bathhouse and the logo of "Suzu's Bath". The bracelets and anklets on her four limbs provided divine protections for waterproofing, insulation, and purification. Her work sometimes meant she had to face the hot water and steam, so she could not do it in the nude.

In that way, her outfit was technically a bathhouse uniform more than a swimsuit. She would put a yukata on over it in the dressing room and then clean the front of the bathhouse, so there were a lot of male customers who came just to see that.

…And as a tradition from when they used to be poor, she still does the swimming lessons dressed like this…

Suzu did not seem to notice, but her slender proportions were highly rated even among the girls. Making a doujinshi of her was sure to sell.

Yes, yes, nodded Naruze, but then Suzu looked back her way. The girl continued from her previous agreement.

"You two are…thinking about something…together, aren't you?"

"Judge. That's right."

Naruze looked to the left.

She saw golden wings there. Someone else had their head lowered, but this person had a Magie Figur opened in front of her eyes.

"Margot, you don't need to give this so much thought."

"Oh, sure. I just can't seem to find any motivation…"

Naito came back to her senses as she spoke.

The Edel Brocken tester documents were opened before her eyes. It described what they would be judged on when they took the test.

"Ga-chan, this says 'welcoming anyone who can chug ten liters of water', 'looking for anyone who can endure being branded', and 'experience being burned at the stake preferred'. How serious do you think they are about those?"

"That company tends to just do whatever they feel like, so you can probably ignore that stuff."

"And the reverse side of the documents has a section titled 'This Month's Negative Thunder Zone Horoscope!', but it's all unlucky stuff."

"What does it say for me?"

"Financial Luck: ◎. Even being careful won't help."

"If that's what qualifies as ◎, that thing must be on a pretty high difficulty level."

Then Suzu approached from the side. She was swapping out the purifying algae creatures in the bamboo basket in a corner of the bath. She removed the creatures floating inside the basket and replaced them with the ones she carried over. The creatures were quite lively as she pulled them out.

"Replacement!" "Temporary break!" "Time to eat a whole bunch!"

"Come to think of it, you don't replace them because the impurities build up inside them. You do it because they get hungry after digesting it all."

"Y-yeah. It's a different…way of thinking…I guess?"

And Suzu said something more.

"Are you…making an important decision?"

"Judge. Oh, but you can stay, Bell-rin. …Right, Ga-chan?"

"That's right. Suzu's safe and I want to make sketch of her outfit.

Yes, yes. Good. While you're taking care of those guys in the basket, kneel down and bend forward. …Yes! That's perfect!"

"Ga-chan, you're going to start bleeding again."

Blood suddenly erupted from Naruze's nose.

"W-wait, Margot. Bleeding from the crotch!? That's a little too dangerous!"

"You can be pretty amazing in a number of ways, Ga-chan."

"Yeah, but I think I've bled too much today. I'm feeling woozy."

"What?" Suzu was confused and she must have noticed the smell. "Eh? Um, wait, uh, d-divine protection, divine protection."

She held her bracelets together and a spell sign frame appeared. It was an emergency hemostasis spell from the Asama Shrine. She entered the bath and placed the sign frame on Naruze's forehead. Then…

"U-um, it's spilling out? Then, w-wait. Over here."

Naruze put up no fight as she was carried out of the tub and placed on the edge in a sitting position. Suzu added an insulation spell to make sure her body did not cool off.

"Um, your hard points…"

"Oh, ours are over there together. Ga-chan's are the ones in front."

Even when taking a bath, they would bring their hard points in with them for body management, divine protections, and security. The waist hard points were the central ones, but anyone at mid-level or above would make sure the neck ones could be used as an alternate center by including a management spell and a start key for the other parts. Naito and Naruze's were that way.

"Our settings are shared, so I can use mine to authorize the external interference to the divine protections."

Naito was glad she had added the ability to change the settings remotely. Suzu placed her sign frame on Naruze's hard point parts lying on the floor and a torii-style sign frame appeared behind Naruze's neck where she sat some distance away.

Naruze's body shook once and then she sighed. She blew some blood from her nose onto her hand and washed the hand in a bucket.

"Ahh, my throat kind of tastes like rust. Suzu, I'll have some coffee milk later."

"S-sure. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'll go eat some yakiniku after this. But…"

Naruze said "but" again and looked to Suzu.

"Suzu, this might be sudden, but…what would Margot and I look like if we wore matching outfits?"

"Judge. You would look…cool."

She answered immediately and with a smile.

…*Wow.*

I seeee, thought Naito.

…It's kind of embarrassing when your friends support you. But…

I see.

I see, I see.

She did not think her motivation was quite that cheap, but…

"You think we'd be cool, Bell-rin?"

"Yeah."

Suzu nodded and organized their unorganized hard point parts so they would not get in the overflowing bathwater.

"You have…jobs, you compete…with the adults, and…."

"And?"

"You fly in the…sky. You're really…cool."

Aside from the flying part, that description fit Naomasa and

Ohiroshiki as well.

Plus, Naito was pretty sure Suzu would have called them cool even if they did not have jobs.

…I guess her final image of us comes from the flying part.

“Um…”

Suzu was blind, but Naito still asked.

“Would we be cool if we had matching outfits when we flew?”

“Your uniforms?”

“No,” said Naito. “Technohexen outfits. …They’ll be special-made for flying and fighting in the sky.”

“Hmm.” Suzu seemed to have trouble imagining this, so she looked up to the steamy ceiling. “Like the automatons?”

“Well, I suppose that is a type of combat outfit…”

“Th-then like Naomasa-san…or Asama-san?”

That was not quite it either. The M.H.R.R. girl’s uniforms were probably closest to it, but…

“Suzu.”

Naruze opened a crop mark frame Magie Figur and drew a picture with her finger. Her fingertip created a thick line, but she increased the resolution so the screen only displayed a hand or a face at a time.

…She’s drawing the zoomed in portions to create the whole without actually seeing it all at once.

Naruze could only do this because she had memorized the measurements of the different parts and had a mental sketch to base it off of. She claimed to have developed the technique so she could secretly draw on a small frame during class.

“There.”

After she finished drawing, she shrank it down to 10% size and the whole picture fit perfectly on the screen. She then added a spell to emboss it.

“This is the outfit we wanted you to see us in. …Here.”

She tossed the Magie Figur and it stopped in front of Suzu. Suzu held a hand out into empty air, found the Magie Figur, and touched it. She placed a hand on the surface.

“…”

Her palm was wet, and that may have been why she rubbed the Magie Figur a few times as if wiping it off.

“————”

Her palm first touched the chest area and then moved up.

“Ah.”

She seemed to realize that was the face. She then carefully checked over the face and the arms. She was especially careful as she stroked the fingers. Then she checked the torso, the legs, and the other parts.

Afterwards…

“Yes.”

To Suzu, a Technohexen looked cool when she flew.

So…

“You’ll be flying…like this, right?”

That settled it.

“I see…”

It might be bragging, but the outfits would actually be divided between white and black. That said…

“I think flying…in matching outfits…would be cool.”

“Judge,” said Naruze.

She erased the first aid sign frame, stood up in the bath, and circled around behind Naito. Naito knew what she was going to do, but she gently spread her wings as if she did not.

“We’ll be together.”

She embraced Naito from behind as if tossing her body between the wings.

Naruze had been out of the bath, so her skin felt cold and ticklish to Naito’s heated and damp back. While resting between Naito’s main wings, Naruze passed her arms between Naito’s main and secondary wings. She brought her hands to Naito’s chest and held her tight, so Naito could not move her main wings properly.

Naito was more or less restrained.

Not even she knew which one of them was being comforted by this restraint and she turned to Suzu.

“Thanks, Bell-rin.”

“Eh?”

The girl seemed confused. Naruze laughed at that behind Naito and then Suzu held up the Magie Figur.

“Can I…have this?”

“Eh?”

Naito was amused by the clear surprise in her partner’s voice and how a tremor ran through the girl.

“Well, if you want one, I can draw a better one,” insisted Naruze.

“I want…this one.”

“She says she wants that one, Ga-chan.”

“Yeah,” agreed Suzu. “I can show…my mom and dad.”

“N-no, wait! Wait, Suzu! I got a little carried away and made the chest see-through and put some excessive detail into the crotch!”

“Why can’t you ever hold back, Ga-chan?”

Naito thought to herself as her partner let go of her and continued telling Suzu to wait.

…I’m still not feeling a whole lot of motivation…

Naruze was worried about her or was at least concerned. Naito felt the backlash and definite restraint of that, but…

“Huh?”

A sign frame appeared next to Suzu’s face.

It was Kimi.

Asama could not use her arms thanks to Kimi and Mitotsudaira.

“C’mon, Asama! Say, ‘ahhhhh’! C’mon!”

“…Ah.”

She was worried everyone was staring as they walked along Okutama.

They were finally getting to the crepe of their snack. On the way from Murayama, Mitotsudaira and Kimi had dealt with the great quantity of ice cream placed in the bucket as a “little girl bribe” from Ohiroshiki:

“We must consume all of this to protect Tomo’s past!”

“That’s right, Mitotsudaira! Let’s have a duel while Asama watches! Okay, my turn comes first! I sacrifice vanilla to summon excitement! Then I place a target lock on the wasabi chocolate.”

“I intercept! I stop the enemy spoon, summon caramel salt, and obtain deliciousness!”

Asama was not quite sure what any of that meant, but she wondered if it was bad manners to clang their wafer spoons together while walking.

But after a while, Kimi said something else.

“The cumulative effect is dealing freeze damage to my stomach! At this rate, I won’t be able to give birth to a healthy child!”

That sounded kind of dangerous, so they decided to hurry to Suzu’s bathhouse.

Asama was about to start on the crepe that Mitotsudaira held out, but she was nervous about what it was. She touched the cooked outer layer with her tongue, placed it in her mouth as if peeling back that outer layer, and gently sucked out the contents.

…Ah.

She found it reminded her of Western sweets. The lingering flavor of cream and the rising aroma of butter were only found in fatty Western sweets and she detected a salty flavor inside the sweetness. It melted quickly in her mouth, but it still felt solid due to the sugar and fat. It reminded her of mizuame, but it stimulated her taste buds differently from Far Eastern sweets made from variations on sugars, red bean paste, and baked sweets.

…Ohh.

I'd get fat if I ate this every day.

Is ice cream the cold version of this? she wondered.

"H-how is it, Tomo?" asked Mitotsudaira.

"Eh? Oh, it's delicious."

She heard a sigh of relief, so Mitotsudaira must have been worried. The Asama Shrine was Musashi's Shinto representative and they were effectively the most "Far Eastern-ish" thing on the Musashi since the Matsudaira family was in Mikawa. She was the heir to that shrine, so it would have been a big deal if this was her first time trying a Western sweet.

"I do eat Western sweets like castella and wafers a fair bit and my dad eats Western food a lot, so there's no need to be nervous."

"Judge. But I was still worried whether you'd like it or not."

As a half-werewolf, she may have been sensitive to smells and tastes. Asama brought her teeth in for another bite, while telling herself it was only to put Mitotsudaira's mind at ease.

She knew what to expect this time as she tasted the eggy crepe and the cream inside.

…This is definitely fattening.

But it also qualified as something she liked.

She squished it between her tongue and the roof of her mouth, she wrapped it around her tongue, and the flavor gradually escaped toward her cheeks. The almost foaming stickiness reminded her of playing in the mud as a child and it matched the shape of her moving tongue.

The flavor of butter seeped out of the crepe in her mouth.

"Nn."

She wiped back up that flavor with the crepe on her mouth, gently bit down, and smoothly swallowed it.

She felt she could enjoy it longer if she bit the sticky mass into pieces and gradually swallowed it, but there was plenty of residual flavor on the roughness of her tongue regardless. She felt she was spoiled for being able to swallow it all at once like that.

She thought a sweet and fatty smell would leave her mouth when she breathed out, so she exhaled the scent of butter and cream through her nose instead.

"…Mito?"

Mitotsudaira was staring at her mouth with her own mouth spread horizontally.

Her expression was easy to read.

"U-um, you don't have to hold back. You can have some if you want."

"Eh!? Um, n-no, I'm not that much of a glutton! I can wait until you've had as much as you want."

This is getting to be a pain again… thought Asama as Kimi smiled into a sign frame on her other side. It looked like Naito, Naruze, and Adele, who had finished her training, had joined Suzu already. Kimi narrowed her eyes and exchanged a few words.

"So what are you three doing there?" asked Naruze.

"Yes! That's right! Mitotsudaira just took Asama's first time! Heh heh heh. I bet you wish you'd seen that, Naruze! Mitotsudaira grabbed her thick thing and held it out for Asama. And then Asama used her tongue to peel back the extra bit at the tip and then – just like this! – took it in her mouth all the way back to the throat! Then with her mouth all sticky from the white stuff that came out, she said, ‘Ah… It’s so thick and delicious. Heh heh. Mito, there’s no need to be so nervous. You don’t have to hold back.’ That’s exactly what happened!!”

“Yessss!!” shouted Naruze.

“What do you mean ‘yes’!? And what kind of explanation was that, Kimi!?”

“Um, A-Asama-san…wh-what are you…doing?” asked Suzu.

“To choose my words carefully, I guess you could say she was acquiring some nutrients, right?” answered Naito.

“That might technically be true, but it isn’t very healthy with all this fat and sugar.”

Oh, was that response too strict? worried Asama, but that was just who she was.

They approached the underground atrium park using a path along Okutama.

“Mito, you can have Kimi’s portion too, so let’s hurry to Suzu-san’s place.”

Chapter 11: Girl Being Peeped On in a First Place

CHAPTER 11
“Girl Being Peeped On in a First Place”
A wave of self-discipline washes in
Motionless self-questioning cannot reach
What is it that rushes toward you?
Point Allocation (See-Through Play)

A wave of self-discipline washes in

Motionless self-questioning cannot reach

What is it that rushes toward you?

Point Allocation (See-Through Play)

Adele was under pressure.

It was a heavy and dense pressure.

“Um, Nao-san? You’re pressing up against me.”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I just can’t help but put my arm around your shoulder, Adele. My bad.”

Naomasa shifted to the right with her back against the edge of the tub. And her left breast (the source of the pressure on the right side of Adele’s face) was peeled away.

…*Fnh.*

As Adele mentally groaned in frustration, Naomasa gently lifted her bath false arm and spun it around at the elbow. Then…

“I need to buy a new one before long.”

“How long has it been since you started keeping that one here?”

“Three years, wouldn’t it be?” suggested Naruze who was lying together with Naito a short distance away. The black wings had been on top earlier, but they were on the bottom now. “Naomasa, you’ve gotten taller, so you really should buy a new one. Your nervous system is thrown a bit off from the difference in length between that and the arm you should have, right? I read in a book that’s common for people who get their prosthetic later in life.”

“It’s true. And this doesn’t have a buffering system like my usual one does.”

Naomasa smiled bitterly and untied her hair. She let the longish black hair drop into a bucket in preparation to wash it and Naito turned her way.

“Huh? Don’t you have the night shift?”

“I’m going to the wide block dojo today.”

“Hah. You take a bath before you work up a sweat?” asked Naruze. “I just don’t get you.”

“I was working on the Suzaku’s maintenance before, so I smelled like oil. The kids don’t care, but the parents get worried.”

“Nao-san, you do like kids, don’t you?”

Naomasa looked over and Adele assumed she would deny it or smile bitterly, but…

“Yes, I suppose so.”

She agreed with a small smile.

“And then Adele felt a throb in her heart…”

“Ga-chan, you should probably stop reading it aloud when you draw out your storyboards.”

Adele wholeheartedly agreed, but Naito had more to say.

“Masa-yan, is it because you like kids that you enjoy having Adele and Bell-rin next to you or in your arms?”

“Wh-why are you so blatantly treating me like a child!?” complained Adele.

“Well, my false arm has a buffering spell and a balance control system, but I might still subconsciously want some support. And maybe it just feels cold since it doesn’t have body heat. Whatever the reason, I end up doing this.”

Naomasa moved closer without even looking Adele’s way.

It pressed against Adele’s right cheek. Or rather, its dampness and resilience seemed to suck onto her.

…And it’s pushing me!

I should have expected this from #3 in the second year boobs caste. If this hit me with some momentum behind it, it’d snap my neck, wouldn’t it?

“So does this help your balance and lack of heat, Nao-san?”

“Hmm, now that I’ve tried it, I’m not really sure.”

"Then this was entirely pointless! Entirely pointless!"

"Don't worry about it, don't worry about it," said Naomasa as the bath door opened with a dry rolling sound and Suzu walked in.

She was wearing her work swimsuit.

"Ga-chan, Go…-chan, I brought…these."

Adele narrowed her eyes to try and see what Suzu held up. If her glasses did not fog up, she could have brought them into the bath with her, but her life as a working student did not allow for that. She had to squint to see what Suzu held.

"What are those, um, two rod-like things?"

"It's for two people when they start getting a little excited in the bath."

Adele thought for a bit on Naruze's explanation, raised her left hand, and spoke past Naomasa's 3D obstacle.

"To make sure I don't screw up here, please give me a hint."

"You use them with your mouth and end up making a lot of noise."

Adele thought on Naito's explanation.

"One more hint."

"You can take turns with it or do it together."

"Hm." Adele thought even harder. "Is it something dirty?"

"You and Suzu can go first."

"What?"

She watched in confusion as Suzu turned her way and walked a few steps toward her. She kneeled on the floor at the edge of the tub and held one of them out to Adele.

"It's a…waterproof…m-mic. For karaoke."

"Oh! For bath karaoke!"

As soon as she said "Now I get it!", Naomasa's hand gave a powerful smack to the back of her head. To avoid the blow, she exaggeratedly collapsed down into the water and got back up.

“Wh-what was that for, Nao-san!?”

“I had a feeling that’s what it was.”

“Th-then tell me! I couldn’t see it!”

“I couldn’t be sure until she said so.”

“You really are the scientific type, aren’t you?”

Adele knew Naomasa was trying to be considerate. And as Adele hung her head, Naomasa took the mic and handed it to her. She checked the bottom of the mic to check for something as she did so.

“Here. …Suzu, won’t this bother the other guests?”

“Oh, we have a s-spell.”

Suzu placed a hand on her neck hard point, but the other people soaking in the water did not seem to mind. The ones that did notice only waved.

Adele gave Suzu a questioning look and the girl confirmed she had already activated the surrounding acoustic spell. Kimi had made the spell and it only allowed the sound into the area around those registered with it.

On the other side, Naruze spoke as she brought her pen to a crop mark frame Magie Figur.

“Can the two of you sing something or other?”

“Wh-what would b-be good? I don’t…know many songs.”

“It can be the Lamb and Veggies Legend, Jumping from that Derrick Sounds Great, A Godly Burst of Full Bladders Across the Land, or anything really.”

“Ga-chan, aren’t you asking for some pretty hard ones?”

“Yeah, you can just go with something you like.”

In that case, Adele wanted to start with something safe that everyone knew.

“Then let’s do the Musashi Song.”

Naomasa listened to Adele and Suzu as she soaked in the bath.

…*What a pain.*

Adele was to her left and Suzu was behind her. No, she heard some water dripping to the right.

“_____________”

Suzu sat on the edge of the bath to Naomasa’s right and soaked her lower legs in the water. Naomasa noted that the line from Suzu’s thighs to hips was well formed, perhaps due to getting down on her knees a lot for work.

…Focusing on the details is a bad habit of everyone from the engine division…and everyone with a god of war.

But Naomasa was trapped between those two.

She had considered ending her bath early and getting a quick bite to eat before heading to the dojo, but she would have to put that off. She listened to the singing voices on the right and left.

“…”

She had to stop herself from singing along, but that may have been because they often sang this song where she worked. She had heard the song thousands if not tens of thousands of times since arriving on the Musashi. But…

…*This ain’t good.*

She found herself recalling the past, before she had come to the Musashi.

When she had finished what work she could do in that rustic farming village, she had felt it would be crass to ask her little sister and the others not to play around and make noise, so she had gone to the field where her family worked to watch them all work.

“…”

The song she had heard and hummed along with there had been different. The people and what they had held had been different. And comparing the present to the past was rude to her current neighbors who knew nothing of that past. So…

"…"

Naomasa placed an arm around Adele's shoulder and the other around Suzu's waist.

She was not sure if she could say they were all friends. There were still things they did not know about each other and the distance between them changed on a daily basis, but these two showed no resistance. Adele's expression seemed to tense and her head seemed to tilt weirdly, but it was within the acceptable range for the human anatomy. Conversely, Suzu leaned up against her.

…Oh, she smells nice.

Is it soap? she wondered before realizing it resembled something else.

…Oil? No, this is…

It was a composite. When working in the engine division, not all of the machines used the same oil. The areas with a lot of weight on them or that would be used for long periods of time would receive a heavy grease. The areas with little weight or that would only be used for a short time would receive a light oil or resin. After working with all of those, a combined smell of "oil" would soak one's body and hair.

In Suzu's case, it was all the soaps and scented scrubbing bags. The ones customers left behind or the provided ones would melt in the water and steam and then soak into her skin and hair.

Her fine skin may have been due to working up a sweat so often as she worked.

…Has Naruze noticed this?

Suzu herself would not have noticed and would not be aware. In that case, Naomasa figured Naruze would not draw it. There was a more appropriate person to clue her in. For example…

"Oh, Masa's here too."

As if providing an interlude once the song was over, a cold air arrived. Naomasa's heat left her back and shoulders as it was sent to someone else.

"What? You're here too, Asama-chi?"

Asama saw Naomasa and saw Adele's head tilting.

It was the usual arrangement. That happened because Adele tried to receive the weight. If she pressed up against it herself, Naomasa's breast would change shape. Suzu was doing just that.

…Everyone's different, I guess.

I summed that up well, thought Asama with a mental clenched fist. Then Naomasa took something from Adele and passed it to Naito and Naruze.

It was a mic.

At the same time, torii-style sign frames appeared next to Adele and Suzu's faces. It was the score for the song they had just sung. Back in the changing room, Kimi had said "Oh, someone's using it" and opened a sign frame. They had listened to the Musashi Song from that, but due to how standard a song it was, it was hard to score many points with it.

A few counters spun randomly before displaying the numbers.

"Oh, 77."

Naito, who often heard people singing it in the transportation district, sounded impressed, so that must have been a decent score.

After checking on that, Mitotsudaira used the waterfall shower on one end to both wash herself and perform a pre-bath purification. She held the Cerberus in her hands and looked at the two who had taken the mic.

"Are you having a bath karaoke tournament?"

"Heh heh. For Naito and Naruze, it's probably practice for the Gagaku Festival. With the acoustics here, I bet their voices will sound nice."

“That’s pretty much it,” answered Naruze without even glancing in Mitotsudaira and Kimi’s direction. She may have thought they still had a ways to go before they would sound nice. As she lay atop Naruze, Naito hugged her with a troubled yet happy look, so that may have been the cute side of Naruze.

Asama wanted to wash her body before getting in the bath. While the bath smelled of soap, her hair and skin were soaked with incense.

…*My uniform was pretty bad too.*

She guessed it would take some time for the algae creatures to clean it and she saw Suzu pass her mic to Naito who did not have one yet. Once Asama reached the washing area, she found Kimi already there and the girl pushed a chair out to her side. She was already letting the shampoo soak into her hair.

“By the wall, it’s more like hearing it live, but that’s closer to hearing their real voices. They’ve been doing this for a while, so it’s probably worth listening to.”

“I don’t like how it feels like I’m using them as a model without telling them…”

“Heh heh. How can you say that when you’re the one that’s keeping it a secret?”

It would have pained her to ask how Kimi knew she was keeping it a secret, so she did not ask. Kimi simply looked at her and spoke in a way that created an earnest atmosphere.

“I wouldn’t have thought your idea of a first date includes taking a bath together and creating a soap kingdom. If we spend the night together after this, are we going to get into censored territory? What are we going to do next? Are you going to entertain Mitotsudaira and me with some soap bubble attacks?”

“What. Are. You. Talking. About?”

Asama squeezed her scrubbing bag until the rice bran came out and she saw Mitotsudaira shivering as she made her way to the bath.

The werewolf race had its own divine protections for grooming, so they did not really need to wash their body When Mitotsudaira did it, it was just for show and it only provided the purification effect applied to all of Musashi's water.

Asama felt it would be rude to her friend if she was jealous of that convenience.

…And things like makeup come off on their own if she doesn't add in a buffering divine protection.

Mitotsudaira owned her own perfume workshop because she wanted to make ones she liked and because perfume was relatively unaffected by her divine protection when compared to powders and creams.

She circled behind Naito and Naruze and entered the bath. She looked Asama in the eye and then indicated the white and black duo with her eyes.

She too was telling Asama to listen. The girl's immense amount of hair did not collapse even in the water, so it almost seemed to have no weight. Asama had heard those rolls also had some divine protections applied, but was that true?

Then she heard a voice.

It was Naruze's.

"She who shows no resistance. A child who turns her back and falls to earth."

The song's different from last night, thought Asama. Then Kimi spoke from behind her ear.

"They have more than one face."

"…Eh?"

Asama considered looking back, but decided against it. She felt it would be wrong to the two singers. Also…

…This song.

The song from the night before had included a folk melody, but it had been a somewhat cheerful song sung with awkward happiness. But this…

"Abandon the holy and outlast the gallows. Without a sound, look ahead to the future."

It was dark. No, it sounded like a requiem. And yet…

“The racing flame, the quaking iron, the gouging steel, the piercing spine of wind.”

…*Is it more powerful?*

“I understand. This is my home. Even as we turn our backs, we are white and black.”

She was not sure, but she sensed something from the words and the song.

…*It’s different from last night.*

She had learned from Mitotsudaira’s knight song that a song was an expression of the person who made it, but this was unlike the song those two had sung the night before.

…*What is this?*

Asama realized that everyone had more than one side to themselves.

This song and that song were different.

The same two people had made it, yet everything seemed different to Asama. After all…

“I let down my hair below the sky. Nema. This is my home. I am a resident of the piercing wind.”

The song from the night before had been a drama during the night and the morning. But…

“I borrow a home and I will eventually head out into the blue sky. But for now, I simply sink into the forest.”

This song was different. It mentioned the blue sky and a forest, but the air was tense and dark.

What time did it represent? Probably a long time ago. It was probably when Naito and Naruze had come to the Musashi as Technohexen. So Asama listened to the lyrics in that light.

“Every day, I wish for a revival. The child looks up to the sky.”

The song spoke of the oppression and revival of the Technohexen. And if the child in the song was them, then it was indeed set in the past. Either that, or it was them recalling the past. But…

“I will not forget. This is my home. I carry on the memories of those who were lost.”

And…

“I raise my hand to block the sun. Nema. This is my home. I am a resident below the sun.

“I will one day be free and hold the sky in my arms. Filled with life, I look up to the sky.”

They had been oppressed as Technohexen and, now that they had come to Musashi, could they head out below the sun without forgetting the past? But…

“I turn my back and look forward. Nema. This is my home. I am a resident of the trees.

“I am lonely and I seek that feeling.”

What is it that this song seeks? wondered Asama.

But then the voice reached her.

“White and black. Rise into the sky.”

It was the Technohexen’s sky.

But Musashi was of the Far East and in the Far East, white and black were symbols of tuning and death.

In that case, they were looking up from below the sky, freely and without fear, but finally…

…They will be residents of the blue sky!

Asama shrunk down a she realized the meaning contained in the lyrics.

It was similar to yet different from Mitotsudaira’s song.

Mitotsudaira’s song had told what had made her who she was now and stated her current beliefs.

…But Naito and Naruze’s song is different!

Asama felt that song had nothing to do with Naito and Naruze’s current life, with their current relationship, or with Musashi’s current state.

It was a set of “rules” that they could not escape and that there was no point in escaping as long as they were Technohexen.

Unlike Mitotsudaira, they were not directly stating their beliefs or way of life.

As they sang of happiness, they had to always maintain the opposite side of that as well.

“That’s their…law of Technohexen.”

They had made a song of something that others could not easily touch. It was only possible because they lived in Musashi and they ignored time and everything else as they verbalized a combination of their realistic opportunities and the eternal things within them.

…Wow.

It was extraordinary.

Just like with Mitotsudaira, they could not change their past, but that was exactly why they would never forget when they had become Technohexen and why they had decided to do so.

If Mitotsudaira’s knight song was about standing on the starting line, then Naito and Naruze’s was about passing the starting line and looking back.

…So that’s why they weren’t satisfied with the song last night.

Asama realized why.

“…”

She blankly took a breath and bent backwards.

“Ah.”

Her foot slipped and her seat toppled over with her.

…Life as a Technohexen isn’t easy.

Streiken Schreck was a Technohexen requiem and a demonstration of their pride.

“Nema. I accept that everything was in reverse. …Herrlich.”

After singing it, Naruze realized something.

…This is our first time singing this in front of people.

The particular location may have helped put her at ease. The torii-style sign frame in front of her could not score the song, so it showed a timeline graph of their volume and intonation while singing. *Oh, Margot’s voice has such clean diagonal lines,* she noticed.

“…”

She looked up.

She knew Asama had listened to their song up ahead with her back turned.

That was fine.

They had put a fair bit of work into the lyrics and the flow of the sound and she had seen Asama’s body tense up at the parts she was supposed to take note of.

…So maybe I should ask her what she thought.

Asama would probably answer. And even if she did not know what it had meant, she would do her best to find something to say.

But…

“What are you two doing?”

When she looked up, she found Asama and Kimi lying on top of each other. Asama had fallen back from her seat and Kimi had fallen on top of her as Asama tried to get up. The two of them were covered in soap bubbles, so…

"Hold that pose for a second. I need to at least get a line drawing done."

Asama lay on her back and saw Naruze moving in her upside-down vision.

Naruze was still looking her way, but her right hand was making a sketch on a Magie Figur. Naito waved over with a smile while lying on top of Naruze, and Asama nearly nodded back, but…

"Eh!? Hold on! Why are you drawing us without permission!? I'll sue you over my Shinto likeness rights!"

"Do you really think a normal trial is enough to scare a Technohexen?"

That's actually a good point, she thought, but then Kimi spoke up with her hips in between Asama's legs.

"Naruze, what kind of pose would you like? Should I get everything all soapy and lift her up toward you?"

"No! Natural is best! Natural! I don't want to draw you looking like whores."

"How are we supposed to make this look natural?" complained Asama.

"Then I'll wash her like normal," said Kimi. "By hand."

"Eh?"

A moment later, Kimi's hands slipped up to her armpits.

"Hee."

She almost flinched back in surprise, but Kimi's hands were unexpectedly warm. They were also slimy with body wash and Asama could feel every movement of her fingers.

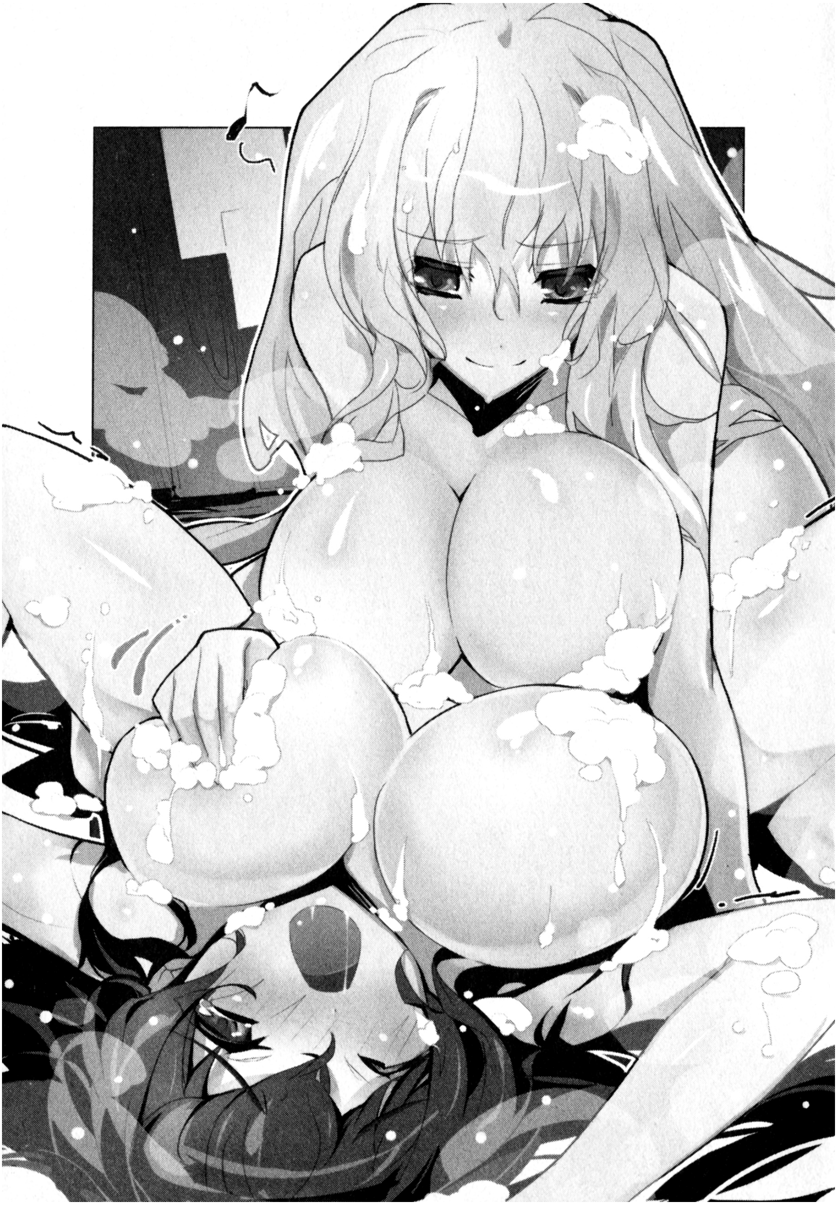
"Hee hah"

She was unsure if she should be laughing like this, but the laughter still escaped her throat as she bent backwards.

…This…

A single thought filled her mind.

…This tickles!!



A ticklish tremor ran through her body as Kimi almost but not quite scratched with her fingernails from the armpit to the chest and along the indentations and bulges of the ribs. Yet she never felt like this when touching and washing herself.

"Ah, wait, Kimi, stop."

That was what she meant to say, but it came out differently:

"Ahee, hyait, Kihi, ahah."

"Heh heh. I'm not even using any kind of spell, so you must be quite sensitive. And thanks to your divine protection spells, not many people can really 'touch' you, so this is a rare experience that only we or my foolish brother can enjoy."

Kimi's left hand moved down Asama's right side and her right hand moved down the line from the center of her chest to her navel, but…

"Heh."

Asama could only tearfully laugh at the soapy sensation.

"What is this?" asked Naito. "Have all the defenses of her divine protections left her weak to people directly touching her?"

"…I'm going to have to rewrite my storyboard again."

"W-wait!"

Asama bent back and moved to the side in order to escape Kimi's hands.

She heard Kimi say "oh, dear", but she just sighed and found even the bath steam felt cool on her heated body.

"Oh…honestly."

Not even she knew what she meant by "honestly", but she got up, took another breath, let the tears in her eyes wash down her steam-dampened cheeks, and found Kimi in front of her.

Kimi gave a narrowed smile.

"Heh heh. I found your weak point again."

"Wh-what do you mean again!?"

"Oh? Back in elementary school, we would wash each other at your spring when we were modifying our contracts or spells."

That was true. And then Kimi narrowed her eyes further, placed a hand on her cheek, and gave an exaggerated shake of the head.

“I’ll need to tell my foolish brother that you haven’t changed!”

“…Eh?”

In her confusion, Asama suddenly realized the area had gone silent.

…Um…

She hesitantly looked back and found it was not entirely silent.

Someone was still moving.

Namely, Naruze was drawing up a storyboard with both hands.

“W-wait, Naruze! What are you doing!? Are you making two of them!? Is that it!?”

“More importantly, Tomo! What was with that information that sounded like a hidden status!?”

Beyond the double layer of six wings, a silver wolf with tons of hair stood up. *That will probably be used for her docking techniques,* concluded Asama surprisingly calmly.

However…

“Um, uh, well, when we were kids, um, we were neighborhood friends.”

Adele raised her right forearm.

“How far did that go?”

Eh? Like how long we were friends? Or how close of friends we were? wondered Asama, but Suzu turned toward Adele.

“It’s rude to A-Asama-san if you don’t…trust her.”

…Th-this just got a lot heavier!

Kimi kept placing a hand on her shoulder from behind, so she had to brush it off a few times. *Whose fault do you think this is?* she thought.

"It used to be that Kimi's parents would work late into the night, so those two would often eat at my place."

"When was this? It affects my storyboard."

"Um, when we were in the third year, I think? Let's see…"

Th-this isn't weird, is it? she wondered.

"It was just before we entered the fourth year…"

Asama heard everyone gasping.

After a few seconds, Mitotsudaira stepped forward and held her palms out toward Asama. Then everyone in the bath formed a light scrum.

"Why didn't she tell me that earlier? My storyboard's useless now…"

"So that's why he groped her without a bra on in the fourth year…"

"She promised…no bands…yeah."

"Anyway, it looks like my king wasn't just taking advantage of her…"

Asama began sweating with intermittent comments of "Um?", "Uh?", or "Hello?" and then she felt heat on her shoulders. It was bathwater. Then Kimi spoke from behind her.

"Go wash yourself until their suspicions reach the level of acceptance. I already finished the upper half, so you have fun with the rest, okay?"

Kimi glanced over at the other group.

"Besides, while it may not have been until the third year, some of them have also been in your spring with my foolish brother, right?"

Adele spoke up on reflex.

"I'm Catholic! I've never used the spring at Asama-san's place!"

"Heh heh. You can still use it without a contract, you know? Although that's only for people she knows."

“Um, Ga-chan and I weren’t part of your group back then…”

“And to be honest, I wouldn’t remember even if we had.”

“Maybe it was me?” suggested Naomasa.

“No, I think you would have been the last one to do that kind of thing,” replied Mitotsudaira.

As they all started tilting their heads, Kimi pressed her index finger against Asama’s back and wrote out, “It’s actually all of them.”

I suppose so, thought Asama.

In elementary school, Musashi had a tradition of holding a “spend the night party” over summer break to deepen the bonds between the families of the first and second years. As a shrine, Asama’s home counted as a field trip, but it was also an important location that took care of Mitotsudaira and other important people.

…So we all spent the night there.

At the time, only the Asama shrine maidens had used the spring, so there had been no division between a men’s and women’s side and they had all played together in swimsuits like it was a pool. So…

…It is technically true that they’ve been in the spring with Toori-kun.

But, thought Asama as she sat back on her seat and placed her finger on Kimi’s back.

She wrote, “She was there too, wasn’t she?”

The original version of a certain person had been there.

“Horizon.”

And…

“There was someone else too, wasn’t there?”

Who that was went without saying and the person themselves might not remember. So…

“That’s right.”

She nodded and exchanged a glance with Kimi to bring the conversation to an end.

“Oh, hey.”

Naito threw something toward her from behind.

She caught it and found it was a waterproof mic.

…?

When she looked back and tilted her head, Naito poked her head out from the scrum and placed a hand next to her mouth.

“We’re holding a meeting, so you decide what to sing next, Asama-chi.”

“What!?”

Asama looked at the mic in her hand.

…Sing?

“Um.”

She thought to herself.

…I’ve never done real karaoke before, you know!?”

“Let’s see…”

Asama quickly placed the mic down on a raised platform on the washing area’s wall. She did so like she was lining it up alongside the scrubbing bags, but also like she was afraid to touch it.

“What am I supposed to do?”

She did have some experience with karaoke. She had even sung karaoke. But that had only been with others and she had only sung one thing.

…It was always Shinto Gagaku, wasn’t it?

Shinto Gagaku was too specialized in recent times, so it was reworked for normal people before it was released to the world at large. Some of the well known examples were the pop-style

Dinnertime Prayer or the metal-style Ode to Destruction: A Prayer for Civil Works and Construction. Their lyrics were prayers, but it was the sound more than the meaning that was offered up to their god.

In other words…

…For those songs, it's important to use your voice as an instrument and produce the proper sounds.

So at first listen, they did not sound like prayers and even sounded like a song in a foreign language. And she could sing that kind of Gagaku without worrying about appearances.

"Ah…"

Could that really compete with Mitotsudaira, Naito, and Naruze's songs she had heard today? No, not compete…

…Can I respond to their songs…?

Of course, she did not even have a song. Mitotsudaira understood that and Naito and Naruze would not even know she was preparing one. So…

…I guess I can go with the usual Gagaku since I'm good at that.

But then she gave a mental shake of the head.

Hadn't she wanted to know if she could change her usual self and her usual way of experiencing things? Then wouldn't it be a good idea to sing the kind of normal song she did not usually sing? But…

"Uuh…"

This would be her first time.

She had hummed normal songs in her room when she was studying, creating accessories for fun, or putting together a spell. She preferred the divine radio to the divine TV, so she had a lot of contact with music. She even owned a few Silver Disks. But…

…What do I do?

This would be her first time singing a non-Gagaku song in front of people.

No, I technically have sung the assigned songs during music class, she thought while marking off that safe zone. *Yes, and we sang a lot during our field trips.*

So she considered singing a song she was already familiar with from class.

…But wouldn't that be way too formal?

And I can't just start singing a field trip song here. What am I, a teacher?

But, she thought. *What song would be good to offer up this mental "first time" to?* And…

"_________"

Would everyone here realize she was doing something beyond her usual self? No, she was being self-centered about all this, so it would not be their fault if they did not.

But in that case, she also wanted a more established situation to do this.

What should I do? she wondered as her mood rapidly sank.

But then…

"Tomo."

Mitotsudaira raised her head from the scrum and called out to her.

"As thanks for before, check under 'A' on the list of songwriters."

"Eh?"

Asama was confused, but a sign frame appeared next to her face. It was Kimi's, but the girl only looked at the mirror on the wall and said nothing.

…Oh.

Asama recalled what Kimi had said on the way here.

…She said she would protect me even from myself.

Kimi and Mitotsudaira were more experienced than her in this and they were both making sure her first time would remain pure. So…

“Thank you.”

She averted her gaze from Kimi as she said that and she looked to the sign frame. Bath Selection 46, the karaoke place that worked with Suzu’s bathhouse, was affiliated with the Asama Shrine and with the Ootsubaki corporations that also fell under the shrine’s control. The ether pathways and the song impurity check were both handled by program spells, but…

“Ah…”

She realized why Mitotsudaira had given her that hint and why Kimi had sent her the list of songs.

The list was scrolled down a bit in the “A” section and she saw a familiar name there.

“Aoi Toori…”

Mitotsudaira opened the same song selection menu that Asama had open.

The index of songwriters did indeed display the Aoi Siblings’ names. The song had been submitted by the Musashi Asama Shrine. The Aoi Siblings had written the music and lyrics and it had been made an official product with the Asama Shrine’s approval.

It was not a strange thing for worshipers of an entertainer god.

Entertainer god worshipers were classified from General to Limited. And when advancing to the Middle or High rank of the Limited class, there was a test that required offering up some kind of “performance” such as a song or dance.

That could of course be a substitution, but this was their first year and they had apparently taken it seriously.

But all of the Shinto contracts on the Musashi were managed by the Asama Shrine and Asama managed those siblings’ contracts personally, so she would have supervised their offering.

That meant she would have heard the Aoi Siblings’ song in March, so why had she not immediately thought about using it for her karaoke song?

“Oh…”

Mitotsudaira realized something.

In March when Asama had supervised the Aoi Siblings’ Limited Middle rank test, she must not have been thinking about starting a band yet.

That had led to a disconnect between her current self and what she had seen and heard in the past.

In that case, thought Mitotsudaira.

When did she start thinking about starting a band?

What had happened between March and now?

…*Could it be…?*

Spring break.

That had included the Music Festival that was seen as the opening round of May’s Gagaku Festival. It was meant to send off the graduates, but it was mainly performed by those who would be second and third years in the coming year.

…*So Kimi and my king performed after rising to Middle rank.*

Asama had of course managed all the ether pathways and spells, so…

“…”

Mitotsudaira was now certain of her speculation.

“He” must have unintentionally shown Asama a decent path for her.

It may have been a coincidence that Asama had invited Mitotsudaira and Kimi, but…

…*Yes.*

Even if it was indirectly, this had to be a path that her king had seen as “a good idea”. And Mitotsudaira herself had been invited along.

Then, she thought as she looked down at the song selection sign frame.

…Our paths coincide, don't they?

The silver wolf decided to do everything she could to support what Asama was trying to do. She did not know if it would work out, but if she looked back while walking along this path, she was certain she would see her king nodding.

Then, she thought again.

She may have been mistaken.

She was in the second year now, but she was nominally a member of the Chancellor's Officers as an Extra Special Duty Officer, she was always given defensive roles, she had her doubts about her effectiveness as a Rank 1 Knight, and most of all, she had no way of confirming her relationship as a knight with her king.

However…

"Judge."

When Suzu glanced back, the wolf gave a meaningless nod and spoke in her heart.

…If I send her down this path, my king is sure to smile.

So will Tomo and Kimi. Not to mention Suzu, Adele, Naito, Naruze, Naomasa, Masazumi…actually, I'm not sure if she'll smile or not. And Heidi will probably start looking for a business opportunity.

…But clearing away my past self here will make a nice dividing line.

She doubted she could wipe away everything about her past self, but it was sure to at least help.

Looking back and asking if she had done the right thing would help point her compass in the right direction.

So…

"…"

She looked up and saw Asama from behind as the girl began listening to the song. It was adorable how she would occasionally nod as if to say “Oh, I see.” And while Asama was so focused on listening to the song, Kimi snuck up behind her with body soap rice bran in both hands, but that was to be expected.

…Someday.

Someday, when Asama could register a song just by looking at the name and starting number, they could have an even more exciting time at the karaoke box. And to help with that…

…That’s right.

Mitotsudaira had to answer Asama’s request to form a band together.

She already had a justification for her answer.

So…

“Hyah! Ah, wait, Kimi! Ah, hya ha ha! Wait, wait, I’m gonna slip!”

“Hey, you two! I’m trying to sketch this, so face this way when you do that!!”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Naomasa as she raised her false arm from the bottom of the scrum. “Asama-chi, have you chosen a song?”

“Eh?”

Asama looked back with Kimi embracing her from behind and she glanced over at the sign frame while half in tears from laughter.

“Y-yes. I think I can maybe do this one. I know the start at least.”

Suzu listened to Asama while sitting on the edge of the bath with her legs soaking up to the knees.

“Okay, I’ll go with this Early Morning Concerto.”

Everyone understood what she was doing. It was partially thanks to Mitotsudaira’s guidance, but Suzu instantly caught on.

…Toori-kun.

That was her first thought, but then she and everyone else opened their mouths at once.

“Ah.”

There was either warning or surprise in their voices. Suzu turned back toward them and they were already exchanging a glance.

“Hey…”

“What should we do?”

“But Asama-chi said she’s fine with it…”

“I-it’ll be fine… It’ll be fine…”

“Suzu-san, it’s okay to admit it when things are bad…”

“W-wait! I don’t like the look of that scrum you guys are forming!”

“Calm down.” Naomasa waved a hand and got up from the bathwater. “I’ve been in there too long. I’ll leave after listening to Asama-chi’s song.”

Suzu considered leaving when Naomasa did. That way she could see Naomasa off and take drink orders for the others. But…

“Um…”

Asama faced her while seated on the floor.

Suzu knew Asama would sing while seated for Shinto rituals. Everyone gulped when they saw her taking the same pose now.

Naruze was the one who broke that silence.

“Asama, it’s completely fine by me if you want to self-destruct in a truly spectacular fashion. My first time doing karaoke, I went with the OP of Masako-san because I thought I could do it.”

“Yeah, that repeats the line ‘Sanetomo, become Minister of the Right’ way too many times.”

“Right, right. Well, I only knew the OP, but it actually has a second and third verse. …That kind of self-destruction is pretty common, so don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, yes, but… So you’d noticed this was my first time singing a pop song for karaoke?”

Asama smiled a little.

“Please don’t judge me too harshly if I’m bad.”

Mitotsudaira thought about Asama’s words.

…Judge you too harshly? This isn’t the place for judgment, so just sing however you like. Or is that exactly why you want us not to judge you too harshly?

She was unsure how to respond to her friend here, but…

…Judge.

No one here would make this a bad experience for her. And with that in mind…

“It’ll be fine. …Just have fun with it.”

Asama nodded and opened her mouth. Naruze was muttering something about “If I draw the mic out longer, I could use this...”, so Mitotsudaira reported it to Asama.

Then came the voice.

“__________”

It carried into the distance, but it was not too loud.

Asama’s voice arrived directly and horizontally as if to pierce through everything in its path.

…Ah.

It reached her.

Asama let her voice ring while looking at the lyrics on the sign frame.

“The sun isn’t out yet, but it’s time to get up. Its dark outside the window, but my heart is bright with excitement.”

Her voice carried quite well. It was possible she did not need the mic. But…

“I have something I can only do now. I can’t wake sis, so I’d better move in secret.”

She had no intention of letting her throat grow shy. After all, this was her first time. There was no point in focusing on her fear and thinking she had failed.

“I head to the kitchen, grab some bread, and check my hair in the window reflection.

“Gotta show my manliness as I head alone to take this on fair and square.”

She briefly considered singing with all her might, but she mentally shook her head.

“How long have I been doing this? I’m always doing this on my own.”

No.

“Just like always and the same as usual, today I head out on my own.”

She felt that songs were emotions, expressions, and points in common.

So the singer should not use all their might.

“My destination is beyond the dark night, in the chilly air of four in the morning.”

She decided her job as singer was to give it her all.

“I can’t follow the wind outside. I walk quickly, with no support.”

…*I wonder what Toori-kun was thinking about when he wrote this song.*

“I tie my shoes, face forward, and use the sky as a clock.

“Gotta get this day started as I head out alone for a serious challenge.”

She hoped she could pick up on what he had been thinking. If she could reproduce those thoughts as the singer, the song would come alive. So…

“How long have I been doing this? I’m always doing this on my own.

“Unlike always and as a change from the usual, today I act on my own.”

Yes, just like always. She did not usually do this, but the way she gave it her all was the same. So…

“My destination is beyond the dark night, in the chilly air of four in the morning.

“No one can follow my trail. I walk quickly, with no protection.”

It did not matter that she was a beginner. She would give it her all and approach the song as much as she could. That stance was easy for her to understand.

“How long have I been doing this? I’m always doing this on my own.

“I’m always starting from here. I slip across the borderline on my own.”

When helping someone as a shrine maiden, it was not enough to just present them with a choice.

She had to understand what that person wanted and help them accomplish that.

“So let’s go. So let’s go. I can throw out my honor to lighten the load.

“Staying true to my desires gives me a free pass to my destination.”

A shrine maiden helped by purifying.

“How long have I been doing this? I’m always doing this on my own.

“Just like always and for a change from the usual, I arrive just on time on my own.”

Their songs purified away what was unnecessary to life.

“So let’s go. So let’s go. Just like always, I gather my courage, open the door, and raise my voice.”

Yes, thought Asama as she sang the final line from the bottom of her heart.

“I’m here to peep, Asama Shrine.”

The song ended.

After she finished singing, Asama realized something.

“This…”

“Judge,” confirmed the others.

That answer led her to check the lyrics on the sign frame.

It was only displaying the final line, so she had it display the entire song and checked through it. And…

“W-wait a second! This song is about peeping on me, isn’t it!?”

“Tomo, you didn’t know that when you chose to sing it?”

“No! I! Did! Not! And aren’t these lyrics a little different from when I supervised those two back in March?”

“Well, yeah,” said Naito. “This is the Bath Selection version.”

“Oh, I see.”

Asama nodded and looked to the left. Kimi was there, but she was trying to sneak away on all fours.

“Hold it.”

Asama grabbed and tugged on the idiot sister’s ankles, and the girl skillfully slid back into a seated position. She then placed a hand on her mouth and averted her gaze while pretending to cry.

“H-help me! Asama is about to do all sorts of unspeakable things to me!”

“What are you talking about? All I’m going to do is severely scold you.”

“Oh, I get it! You’re going to scold me with your ‘arrow’, aren’t you!? Aren’t you!?”

“Oh, you don’t need to put any quotes around the word arrow.”

“What are you talking about!? Do that and I’ll die! It’ll be on the news tomorrow: ‘Wise Sister Stabbed by Asama’s Arrow, Dies of Shock’! But…”

Kimi looked back at Asama and smiled a little, so Asama glared at her.

“What is that smirk for?”

“Judge. Well, Asama. If you think about it, this means you used my foolish brother peeping on you to have your first time. It’s just like the Yobai culture of the Heian period.”

“D-don’t put it like that! Not like that! Ah! Naruze! Why are you getting a nosebleed all of a sudden!?”

“Sorry, I’ll give you some warning next time.”

“Judge, judge,” said Naomasa as she got up.

After glancing over to make sure Suzu was using a first-aid spell on Naruze, she placed a towel over her shoulder and started to leave. But first, she looked to Asama.

“I feel like I got a taste of your skill there, Asama-chi.”

“Oh, thanks…”

“Calm down.” Naomasa smiled bitterly. “You’ll have a hard time of it if you don’t keep your perfectionism in check.”

“…Eh?”

She was aware that side of her existed.

It was true there was an analog aspect to singing. Her voice was not the same every day. It changed with the weather and with her age. Her interpretations of things would change too. So it would be hard to hope for perfection. But…

…I feel like Masa isn't quite right there.

As she wondered why, Naomasa softened the look in her eyes.

"Don't worry about it. If you do this the way you do everything, the people around you will approach and put everything in order. We help each other out like that."

"Right…"

Asama nodded without knowing why and then she heard Suzu laughing.

"Naomasa…-san is doing her best…to compliment you."

"The problem with you, Suzu, is that you think everyone is a good person."

With that, the classmate with a false arm turned around with a laugh and Asama saw a hint of what Suzu had mentioned in that action.

…Yes…

She had voiced her concerns first, but Naomasa had probably meant it as a compliment in her own way. It was up to Asama how to interpret what she had meant by her "skill", but…

…Right.

That girl was a friend. She would not mock someone's "skill" and she would not have even mentioned it if it were lacking. It was the same as Asama feeling like she had seen Naomasa's "skill". So…

"Masa."

Naomasa looked over her shoulder as she placed a hand on the door to the changing area and Asama spoke to her gaze.

"Thanks."

"You aren't just being polite, are you?"

"I'm expressing my happiness."

"That's fine then."

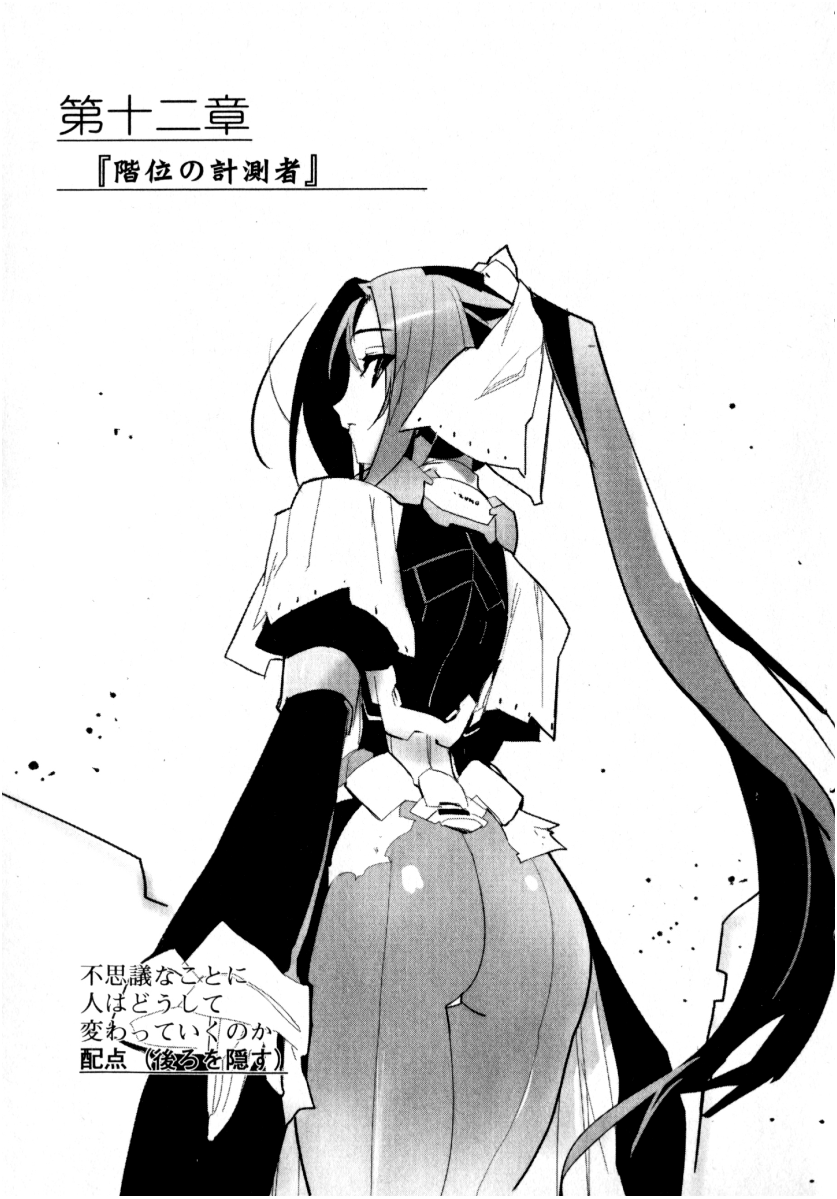
Naomasa opened the door with a bitter smile and Suzu started to follow her.

“Ah.”

But the girl frantically grabbed and pulled on Naomasa’s arm and looked back toward Asama and the others.

“Do-do you have any…d-drink orders?”

Chapter 12: Measurer of Rank


第十二章
『階位の計測者』
不思議なことに
人はどうして
変わっていくのか
配点（後ろを隠す）

Why do people

Have such a strange tendency

To change?

Point Allocation (Hiding What Lies Behind)

Someone looked up and measured the sound in the sky.

It was “Musashi”, who stood halfway across the bridge of Okutama’s academy. She was accompanied by…

“ ‘Okutama’, I have determined we are frustratingly strange things. Over.”

“Eh?” “Okutama”, an automaton with shoulder-length hair, looked back. “What is strange about automatons like us, ‘Musashi’-sama? Over.”

“Judge.” “Musashi” gave a small nod. “For example, the students in the courtyard down there are performing what is honestly fairly pointless training, getting knocked through the air in the process, and laughing like crazy people. And at what they call the summer school festival, they play loud music, shout a lot, dance a lot, eat a lot, and produce large quantities of trash. If only they would calm down a litt-… Oh, this might sound like I am complaining, but as an automaton, this is nothing as emotional as that. It is merely the ‘truth’. Keep that in mind, ‘Okutama’. What do you mean I always get like this when Sakai-sama isn’t around? Listen. On top of that, they are also wasting fuel flying around and around in the air at meaningless speeds while calling it a game or a race. And-… Oh, there’s another injury. Besides, they are fighting their own here. … Now, to get back to my point.”

“Musashi” expressionlessly looked around by turning her head at only the average human range of movement.

“Everything they do tends to be pointless, so why do we not simply conclude mankind is incomprehensible and view ourselves as superior? Over.”

“That would be because we are automatons.” “Okutama” followed “Musashi’s” gaze up into the sky as she spoke. “We cannot comprehend mankind because, before the gods ascended into the sky, the concept of automatons had settled into a general pattern and been explained within about ten years after its creation. That was built into the very ‘existence’ of automatons, so every automaton is destined to serve and support mankind on a level deeper than their OS. Meaning…”

Meaning…

“I can estimate that one of our distant ancestors determined that mankind is fundamentally incomprehensible and that it would take a lot of work to comprehend them, but since that would be a pain, it would be better to assist them, help them, and make sure they do not develop in a negative direction. Over.”

“I see. So we stand by their side rather than comprehend them. That differs greatly from my estimate: Our ancestors decided mankind was hopeless, but felt sorry for them and decided to support them. Over.”

“…‘Musashi’-sama, did something bad happen to you? Over.”

“Well.” “Musashi” moved her head. “You said automatons find mankind to be ‘fundamentally’ incomprehensible. Over.”

“Are you finding them more incomprehensible ‘in practice’? Over.”

“Judge. This example is one of the greatest things that an automaton in charge of a city like Musashi will find incomprehensible. And these are my thoughts on the matter…”

Just as she was going to continue, someone climbed the stairs. It was a black-haired girl holding a spear with a cover on it.

“Do you need something, Vice President Tadayo-sama? Over.”

“Oh, judge, judge. I wanted to thank you for the previous training and the tea. And what did you think while watching from up here? Do you think they’ll be any use?”

“Musashi” did not immediately answer that person.

First, she asked for confirmation about something.

“Do you think they will see actual combat? Over.”

“We always need to plan for actual combat. Right?”

“Musashi” listened to what Tadayo had to say and the girl continued.

“Yesterday it was a Non-God Sword that showed up. Battlefields are everywhere…they appear everywhere. We need to keep that in mind.”

Tadayo added another “right?”, but “Musashi” could not agree.

…She’s this way too?

“Musashi” did not need to ask the other automatons to do a search or provide their opinions. Tadayo had said enough herself.

…Yesterday it was a Non-God Sword that showed up.

On top of that, she had said battlefields were everywhere. That meant there would be battlefields other than the one with the Non-God Sword.

It was not an issue of possibility.

Tadayo had said they “are” everywhere.

“Do you think the Musashi will become a battlefield?”

“That’s a dangerous topic you’re discussing there, ‘Musashi’-san, Tadayo-kun.”

A voice reached them and “Musashi” knew who it was without needing to look back.

“Please stop doing an impression of Sakai-sama, Student Council President Torii-sama.”

“Sure, sure.”

Someone stepped up beside her. The girl then lifted “Musashi’s” skirt and slipped on inside it. “Musashi’s” self-preservation instincts as an automaton did not trigger a counterattack because this was an important officer, because this was based on Torii’s dancing technique and spells, and because it had happened several times already.

…I have determined that growing accustomed to these things is troublesome indeed.

Her skirt spoke.

“Tadayo, guess the color.”

"Musashi" took action. She grabbed and gently lifted her maid uniform's side skirts. That parted the bottom of the skirt, revealing Torii below the tail portion of the skirt.

"Asakusa, Shinagawa, well done. Over."

With those words, several straight lines fell from the sky and stabbed down on either side of the tail skirt.

They were blades. Tachi, katana, kusari-tachi, yoroidoshi, and other Far Eastern blades lined up on either side to form a cage with the tail skirt as the roof.

They had been fired by the ships' launch catapults and Asakusa and Shinagawa had made course corrections with buffering spells.

They stabbed into the deck.

There were several solid sounds, but no fragments of the stairs scattered. They all stabbed straight in and Torii shouted from the center.

"Whoaaaaa!? Now that's a new attack, 'Musashi'-chan!"

"Musashi" knew what the girl would do next: she would cling to her butt. So…

"Musashino. Well done. Over."

Something dropped down as if stabbing at the seam between the tail skirt and the back of the waist hard point parts.

Musashino: "Sorry, Musashino-sama. I didn't have a good weapon handy. Over."

A god of war had fallen from the sky.

With a roar, an empty mid-sized god of war fell onto the landing of the stairs up to the academy.

"Musashi" thought to herself as the wind and vibration reached her: *I was right to immediately release the tail skirt.*

After all, the tail skirt was covered by the right foot of the god of war that had fallen behind her with that foot placed half a step forward.

Even if she had not released it, she doubted she would have been pulled back and fallen, but it might have damaged the hard point parts or torn the tail skirt.

…But…

Even if it was due to someone else's deficiency, she was the leader of Musashi's automatons and yet she had lost part of her official equipment. She considered hiding it with her hands, but something else was more important at the moment.

"Torii-sama. What exactly do you think you are doing? Over."

Torii's face poked out from below Tadayo's crotch in front of "Musashi".

As soon as the god of war had fallen, the girl must have slipped out the back of the tail skirt and blade cage. Then she must have circled behind Tadayo and stuck her head between the other girl's legs.

"Musashi" had to wonder when the girl had done all that, but she could always check her visual devices' records to find out. A high-level musician of an entertainer god would be able to pull off movements that did not trigger her motion detection.

Just as "Musashi" decided to set that issue aside for now, Torii looked expressionlessly up at her from between Tadayo's legs. Tadayo, unsurprisingly, was glaring down at Torii.

"Time for a skit."

Torii turned to point her head upwards while between Tadayo's legs.

"Birth of your first grandchild."

"I see this is a breech birth. Over."

"Okay, how about another one?"

Torii pulled her head back and created an A-shape by using both arms to form a horizontal bar between Tadayo's knees.

"It's that form of censorship you see a lot lately," she said quietly.

“Musashi” heard a comment of “I see”, so she glared at “Okutama” as a standard expression of protest.

Tadayo then crossed her arms and sat down to crush Torii below her.

“Whoa!” shouted Torii. “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Wait, my arms are caught, my arms are caught! And we’re on the stairs here, so my ribs are hitting the corner! Wait, ah hee hee hee hee hee! Ah, they’re rubbing against the corner! Kee hee hee hee hah!”

“Stop laughing like that, you overly sensitive girl. You always get in people’s personal space the second you get a chance.”

“Yeah, but while I somehow managed to grope Asaman’s, I couldn’t get through any of her defenses. She’s got such a strict barrier.”

“That shrine supports Musashi, so of course their defenses are top notch. You should be glad you weren’t repelled.”

As the two began speaking with one on top of the other, “Musashi” asked a question to get them back on topic.

“You two… Do you think the Musashi will become a battlefield? Over.”

One of them answered her question.

It was Tadayo.

“We aren’t the ones that want that to happen. I mean…” The girl shrugged as she continued. “The Musashi isn’t a place of war. If it does become a battlefield, it will have to be an outside force that causes it.”

“You mean a mysterious phenomenon or another nation will start a battle? Over.”

“Yes.” Tadayo nodded. “The mysterious phenomena will definitely happen and we’ve already fought small-scale battles against them or hunted them down. But the other nations are something that our generation can’t really know for sure. That’s partially because we’ve made a point of compromising to get along with the other nations. Even the Provisional Council has been really quiet this year,” she said. “But there have been sparks during our generation that could lead to war and we of course are doing our best to extinguish them.

But…”

“But? Over.”

“Judge. …Once we’ve graduated, all we can do is leave everything to the next generation. That’s all there is to it.”

“Musashi” felt something did not fit together there.

The third-year Student Council officers were predicting war.

…*And the students of Class 2-Plum…*

They were predicting combat and they were working together or complementing each other.

Had the other classes or the general population been doing similar things? Had “Musashi” simply overlooked it? But…

…*It really does not fit together.*

It would be easy to simply conclude that the Student Council and Class 2-Plum were working together toward some kind of goal since they were both acting based on a prediction of war or combat.

But Tadayo was saying she wanted their generation to remain obedient and that they would leave everything to the next generation. And in “Musashi’s” memories, the students of Class 2-Plum had never extended their cooperative work or complementation of each other to the Student Council or Chancellor’s Officers.

It looked like they both had their own separate plans and both of those led them to predict the Musashi would become a battlefield and that they would see combat.

“———— Over.”

“Ohhhh! That was so cool, ‘Musashi’! What was that!? D-did you do it like this? Like this?”

“No. Like this: ———— Torii-sama, move your head a little more up and to the right. Yes, and then: ———— Very good. This is one pattern for expressing your intent to put off making a decision. Over.”

“Judge, judge,” said Tadayo as she waved a hand and averted her gaze.

She then got up and took a step back. But she did not stop on the landing.

“Toh.”

She spun around.

She bent backwards and performed a flip with one leg swinging high into the sky. In the blank space created by the descending stairs, she had the clearance needed for her head as she rotated her body around her head.

…*Well done.*

“Musashi” could tell that was pure martial arts without the use of any spells. The girl could only pull that off after training her body and obtaining an athletic foundation.

She kept her body straight without twisting it, and she performed the action as lightly as taking a large step backwards.

“Take this.”

When she landed on the stairs below, Tadayo grabbed Torii’s legs. She lifted those legs up like a wheelbarrow, and…

“We’ll be going.”

“Tadayo-sama, about your initial question…”

“Judge.”

After walking a few steps down, Tadayo looked up and faced “Musashi” with her eyebrows slightly raised in a smile.

“I asked if they would be any use, right?”

“Judge. Over.”

“Then don’t worry about it. You’ve seen others out there doing the same things we are, haven’t you? I only vaguely know who they are, but as long as you know there are others like that, we’ll be fine.”

Tadayo nodded as she spoke.

"We can leave things to them when we graduate."

Tadayo turned around the other way and spoke as she dragged Torii away.

"C'mon, idiot. Let's stop by Suga's place. He'll probably be working right now."

"We'd just get in his way- oh, oh, oh, oh, oh!!"

Tadayo did not turn back toward Torii who walked down the steps on her hands. Finally, Torii arched her back and bounced a ball on her head after grabbing it from somewhere.

"Arf, arf!"

"Why do you insist on playing these weird games?"

Tadayo wrinkled her brow as Torii began clapping her hands as well.

"Are we or aren't we going to go get in Suga's way?" asked Tadayo.

"Oh, we'll definitely be doing that. But, y'know, we probably shouldn't go get in Nabe's way."

"You sure are considerate."

"Yeah, Suga and Nabe are both going to leave the ship after we graduate."

"Yes, yes." Tadayo smiled bitterly and looked back toward Torii. "Is something coming?"

"Oh, yeah. Judge. When you get to the higher ranks, you earn the right to act as a defender of Musashi, so I can kind of tell. It's probably way stronger for Asaman," explained Torii while catching the ball on her forehead. "I think it's coming in more clearly since everything's so clean outside. So how about we stop by Suga's place and get ready?"

"That's going to end up being my job, isn't it?"

"Right, right," said Torii as she suddenly arched her back again. "Oh, I forgot to ask 'Musashi' something. That girl's probably already here from Aki, so ‘Musashi’ might’ve told me where she is if I’d asked.”

“You can’t do that unless you have a really good reason. And besides…”

A rumbling passed through the sky. The delivery workers were gathering together after getting several decent records in a row.

“Honestly…” Tadayo looked up toward the sound of the wind in the sky. “Internal conflict, external conflict, current conflict, and future conflict. There’s just too much to deal with it all.”

“Tomo?”

Mitotsudaira looked to the black-haired shrine maiden soaking in the bathwater to her right.

Without even looking to her surroundings, Asama was viewing a sign frame that Hanami had opened.

To Mitotsudaira’s left, Kimi almost nonchalantly spoke up while having fun letting Uzy swim through Mitotsudaira’s submerged rolls of hair.

“Is it yesterday’s Non-God Sword?”

“Not quite. If anything, it’s a Non-Dragon Sword.”

“Eh?”

Adele and the two Technohexen frowned as Asama began operating the sign frame.

“Its spirituality is high and it’s already passed the manifestation point, so I doubt it will pass through the barrier the shrine placed around the Musashi. My dad has already temporarily sealed the trade entrances and exits and the trade-… Actually, the merchants are showing no sign of stopping and they’re sending out hub ships to keep trading. We’re strengthening the anti-spirit side of Musashi’s defense barrier, so we’ll be safe inside the stealth barrier.”

“You sound like there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

After Mitotsudaira’s comment, the Cerberus barked atop her head.

…Is it feeling the change outside?

With the Musashi's defense barrier provided by the Asama Shrine, no mysterious phenomenon outside could influence anything inside. The dangerous current of ether would be shut out, so if the Cerberus was still reacting…

"Is it related to the ether and ley line stagnation from yesterday?"

"I'm not sure what to say in this situation."

Asama glanced over at Mitotsudaira, so Mitotsudaira also looked around. She saw Kimi smiling and the Technohexen and Adele nodding with eyebrows raised.

The dancer spoke while still letting her Mouse swim in the bathwater.

"No one here will complain if you say something that turns out inaccurate."

"Then." Asama nodded. "A Non-Dragon Sword is a mid-level mysterious phenomenon that comes from the ley lines. Normally, it would be best to assume a different stagnation became the Non-Dragon Sword and it's come to consume the lingering remnants of yesterday's Non-God Sword…but the ether readings suggest otherwise."

"Is there no stagnation, just like with my Cerberus?"

Asama nodded.

"A 'Non-type' with no stagnation at its foundation is rare enough on its own. Most likely, the dragon was born from a 'mold' produced near the Kojima Peninsula, just like yesterday's Non-God Sword. But…"

"Yes?"

"It seems to be flying while being very cautious of the surrounding airspace. It sometimes reacts to empty space and attacks."

Mitotsudaira asked a question on reflex.

"If there is no stagnation at its foundation, can it be tamed like my Cerberus?"

Mitotsudaira saw Asama turn her way.

She looked directly at her.

“The difference between it and that Cerberus is – I think – the nature of a dragon and the amount of consumed ether.”

Sensing the caution in Asama’s wording, Mitotsudaira felt her shoulders grow tense. Was she growing aggressive? Just as she prepared to apologize, Kimi suddenly cut in.

“Are you sure you don’t have a tail here to lift in anger?”

She did not even have time to think “eh?” before a hand slid down along the line of her tailbone above her butt.

“Hyan!”

She lifted her hips forward and stood up to escape. This launched the Cerberus from her head, so she caught it in midair. Then she turned back toward Kimi, but the girl had already stood up.

“Asama? You’ve already contacted the Chancellor’s Officers, Student Council, and guards, haven’t you?”

“I have. But…something is bothering me a little. It’s about Mito’s Cerberus…”

Mitotsudaira knew what Asama wanted to say. It was the answer to a question Mitotsudaira had asked earlier.

“Just like my Cerberus, that Non-Dragon Sword has the nature of the local gods, doesn’t it? That would explain why such rare beings can appear in such quick succession.”

“We still don’t know if the local gods are involved in this. With the Cerberus and Non-Dragon Sword, it’s still just two, so it’s still within the range of what we can call a coincidence.”

“Then,” said Kimi while lifting the corners of her mouth. “What are the Chancellor’s Officers, the harbor guards, the knights, and the vassals doing?”

“The Chancellor’s Officers are thinking of heading out to intercept it, but they’re still negotiating with K.P.A. Italia over the conditions and possibility of doing so. The harbor guards are working with the shrine to strengthen the important points of the barrier. As for the Knight League and the Vassal League…”

They had already contacted Mitotsudaira, so she opened a sign frame.

“The lords with territory on the starboard side are defending their respective regions.”

“Mito, your territory is…”

“Judge. Mine is on Tama and Murayama. But it is on the inside, so I will not be called on this time. If I am going to fight, it would have to be as part of the Chancellor’s Officers.”

“Hmm.” Adele twisted her mouth sideways and looked at her Catholic sign frame. “The vassals under the command of those knights with starboard territory are to head out, but the rest of us are to wait for instructions from the Chancellor’s Officers. For now, it looks like I won’t be called on either.”

“Yeah, and neither will we.”

Naito brushed up her hair. She pointed her speedometer-style Magie Figur their way to show the notification from Geheimnis Shabbat.

“The delivery workers are to wait and see like usual. It says they’re still playing games.”

“Not surprising. There are some former aces from other nations in there.”

But that was a problem.

…We can’t head out to the scene.

Mitotsudaira of course understood that doing nothing was best when they had Musashi’s defenses. Even if it was a manifested mysterious phenomenon…

“Does a Non-Dragon Sword eat into its surroundings?”

“Only a little, but yes. That said, the barrier won’t be broken and its nature as a dragon will overpower its self-preservation instincts, so it will use more ether than it takes in and ultimately vanish. Plus, the Non-God Sword could eat into the surrounding space more easily with the theatre ship to stand on, but the Non-Dragon Sword is an aerial creature and it has nothing to stand on. It will use up a lot of ether just by floating there, so…"

Asama seemed to realize something, so she stopped speaking and hung her head.

Kimi spoke up next to her.

"No one thinks you're an ether and mysterious phenomenon nerd, so keep going.

"No, um, how should I put it…?"

Asama inhaled and brushed her bangs up off her face.

"As long as we have the Musashi's defenses, we will not take any damage. And after yesterday's incident, the theatre ship was given similar protection and sheltered, so leaving this one alone would be best."

But…

"If we can just leave it alone and wait for it to disappear…it does raise the question of why the local gods would do this."

"So, Asama-chi, your motivation is that we might be able to figure out what's causing these mysterious phenomena if we head out and investigate?"

"In that case," said Kimi while crossing her arms below her breasts like normal. "We just have to head out there and take a look at this dragon that's going on a bit of a rampage. We can ask it why they're showing up near the Musashi. If we're being overly self-conscious, then there's nothing to worry about. And if not, we can hear the reason and we're done. Asama, can you have us sent out as representatives of the Asama Shrine in the name of investigating the mysterious phenomenon?"

"I'm making the request now. It is recommended we leave the thing alone, so I'm adding on the conditions that we stay out there for a limited time and that we do not fight it. That will avoid stimulating it further, but…"

"Heh heh. What will you do?"

Asama responded to Kimi's question by raising her eyebrows.

She slowly stood from the bath and let the bathwater drip from her.

"A reinforced ship is being sent out for the external buffering of the stealth barrier, so I think we can use that. If the local gods are behind this, we should learn why they want to take physical form like this. Also…"

Asama looked to Mitotsudaira while smiling with her eyebrows somewhat lowered.

"Sorry, Mito. You won't be able to work as a shrine maiden today…"

"What are you talking about? Won't investigating the Non-Dragon Sword count as shrine maiden work?"

"Eh?" said Asama with a look of light surprise and slight joy.

Mitotsudaira said more while looking to Kimi, Adele, and the Technohexen.

"And of course, none of us is cowardly enough to disagree, right?"

…Should I say that she escaped?

With that thought, "Musashi" looked away from the two girls descending the stairs. She then leaned against the stairway's left railing and pressed her butt against it.

"Okutama" looked her way and asked a question.

"Are you embarrassed that people can see your butt, 'Musashi'-sama? Over."

"Musashi" looked to her tail skirt underneath the empty god of war's foot.

"I have determined the failure of the equipment given to me is damaging to my dignity as general captain. I have asked the engine division to remove the god of war, so you head to the starboard port, 'Okutama'. Over."

"What? The starboard port?"

As “Okutama” looked “Musashi’s” way, she corrected her expression.

“Judge. The external investigation. As a request from the Asama Shrine, I have determined it would help solve later problems concerning our proximity to Aki if a captain level automaton accompanies them. Over.”

“Based on their location data, the requester is still belowground in Okutama. I have determined she is purifying the bathhouse. Until she is ready, work to convert the ship’s deck into an investigation ship. Over.”

“Judge. I agree that would be safest as it would show K.P.A. Italia and the other coastal nations that we do not intend to attack them or do anything other than perform an investigation. I will be going. Over.”

“Okutama” bowed and ran down the stairs. She opened several sign frames along the way to have the ship prepared for launch.

“Musashi” sighed as she watched the other automaton leave. She considered making a few arrangements herself, and…

…The Chancellor’s Officers have also noticed the external ley line and the stagnation occurring there.

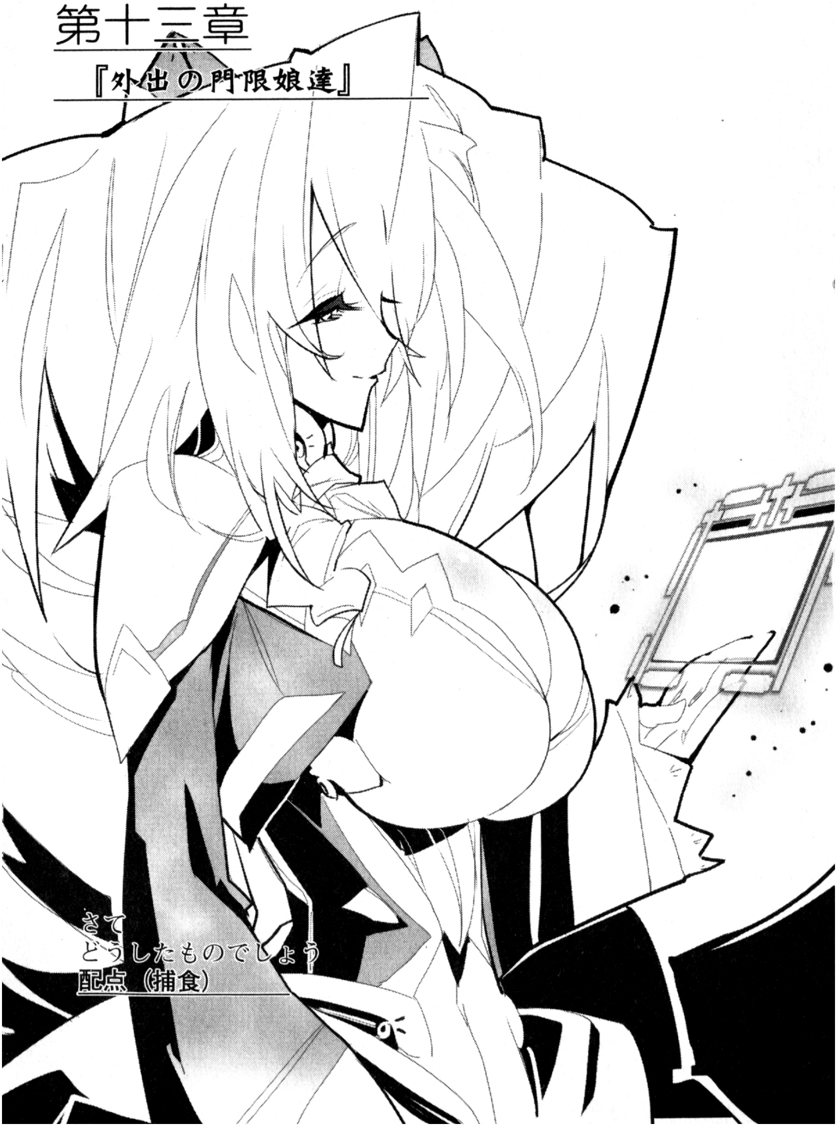
If the Asama Shrine had noticed, the information would have been shared with most of those who had high-level contracts. Torii had a high-level Ootsubaki-style contract, so she had to have noticed. The Asama Shrine had also informed “Musashi” and the Public Morals Committee that led the guards, so word had been passed down to the ship captains and guard stations. In that case…

“I have determined caution would be advised.”

“Musashi” added a “but” as she opened a sign frame, displayed a map of the Musashi, and viewed the rectangular route being drawn on it.

“This is the route for Asama-sama’s date course. …It has grown highly irregular, which is somewhat worrying. Over.”

Chapter 13: Curfew Girls on an Outing


第十三章
『外出の門限娘達』
さて
どうしたものでしょう
配点（捕食）

Now, then

What do you call this?

Point Allocation (Predation)

"What are you looking at?"

A male voice spoke inside a stone room.

It was a large room with the stone walls decorated by patterned cloths. The wooden flooring had a yellow carpet on which sat a large canopied bed and a table set.

A man sat at the table and a woman holding up a *signe cadre* stood next to him.

The woman, who was tall and had an incredible amount of hair spilling down her back, looked to the man at the table.

He half-turned his slender body toward her and spoke with a smile in his somewhat slanted eyes.

"Is Nate doing okay?"

"She is. Our daughter seems to like playing the hero."

A laugh that may or may not have been bitter escaped her lips as she circled behind him. She embraced his slender body from behind and did not hesitate to press her cheek against the base of his throat. She continued, unbothered by his gaze on her.

"Look, you can see her clearly here."

She held up the Catholic *signe cadre*. She placed it in front of them but then brought it to the side of her own face.

"Heh heh. *Which one* are you looking at?"

"Oh, um, y-yeah…"

"These are our daughter's exploits I'm talking about."

She used both the movements of her lips and of her cheek to tickle the side of his face. As they exchanged the rising heat of their cheeks, she embraced him tighter while pressing her chest into his back.

"Look. In this picture, she's wearing a Far Eastern shrine maiden outfit. She was supposed to be heading down a knight's path after the pummeling I gave her, but it seems her path has grown quite a bit more complex.”

“Testament… Do you think it’s selfish of her to want to head out to the front instead of being a shield bearer?”

“I think that girl wants to be scolded.”

“But she has such a lively expression there.”

“What does she look like to you?”

“Well.” He faced her again. “This is something I figured out a long time ago and I’m sure Nate will figure it out eventually. Especially since I think she’s found a proper king for herself.”

So…

“Even if she does disobey you again someday, I think you need to face her properly.”

“Do you really think I’ll hold back if that happens?”

“I think you can weigh your actions against when you ‘pummeled’ her before,” he said. “But that would damage the liveliness I can see inside her.”

“I’m feeling a little jealous of my own daughter.”

“In that case.” He gave a slight smiled. “You can have Nate do what I can’t.”

“Are you trying to turn me into an overprotective mother?”

“Is it overprotective to teach your daughter the basics and dress her up so she can face you properly?”

“You are too good with words.”

She tilted her head and bit his lower lips with her own lips.

It happened suddenly.

As he tried to pull back a little bit, she pressed her chest harder against him, and…

"…Nn."

She stuck her tongue out from her lips and used its rough surface to scrape at his lower lips held between hers. She shook her head a little to move her hair and hide their action from their surroundings.

The rest was simple. She held his body and his chair from behind so he could not move. She simply bit down on his lower lip and pulled to have him face upwards.

"…"

She pulled his lip a little bit into her mouth and sucked at it more with her saliva than her tongue.

"Ah."

He formed words with his trapped mouth.

"Y-you need to study…"

Despite his head facing upwards, he did his best to look at the books on the table.

They were math and science textbooks. But she did not look that way. She released his lip and used her wet, pink tongue to lick from his cheek to her own adjacent lips. And…

"Which is more important to you: me or science?"

"But Anne will be mad if you don't pass the entrance exam."

"Wrong answer." She smiled. "At times like this, you aren't supposed to mention another woman's name even if it is an accurate answer. Besides, I still have three days until my special exam."

"Yeah, but you have to get through two textbooks in those three days. And once you're done with that…"

He tensed his shoulders as he spoke.

"You have the weeklong entrance exam retreat in Paris, right? With Luynes and the automatons."

"I'll be fine," she immediately answered.

“Testament.” He nodded. “I trust that you will be.”

“Yes.” She also nodded. “We have about 36 hours until I leave three days from now. We need to cram in as much *studying* as we can until then. Since the retreat will be a week long, we need to try to cram in a week’s worth.”

“Testament. That’s right. If you *study* a lot now, you can get through that retreat.”

“Testament. Very true. We only have 36 hours left. If we use that time right, we can get through the loneliness during the retreat.”

“Wait a second.”

“What is it?”

“Studying?”

“Studying.”

She smiled and blushed before continuing.

“We need to spend lots of time teaching each other the optimal answers and stain reactions. It will always be my turn, of course.”

“Oh, I don’t often get divine mails from my father.”

Mitotsudaira opened a sign frame while following along on Okutama’s starboard pier.

Asama glanced back from up ahead.

“Do you mind if I ask what it says?”

“It says, ‘You don’t need to worry. Your mother has plenty of energy.’ He always sends the same thing.”

Mitotsudaira wore a shrine maiden outfit and she smiled with her eyebrows lowered.

And as Kimi followed along behind, she intentionally sped up to slam into Mitotsudaira chest-first. She even made sure to clear aside Mitotsudaira’s plentiful hair first.

“Ahn. O-oh, c’mon, Mitotsudaira. You wanted the busty divine protection of an entertainer god, so you decided to rub your head against them, didn’t you? Didn’t you? Well, if you insist. Grope away!”

“I will do nothing of the sort!”

Is this how it looks when Kimi and I do that sort of thing? wondered Asama as she took the lead with bow and charm holder in hand.

Their destination was an investigation transport ship moored at the end of the pier. “Musashi” had prepared the hundred meter ship for investigating the Non-Dragon Sword outside.

…*Who’s going to pilot it?*

She saw “Okutama” on the ship. Asama bowed and “Okutama” bowed back. The others behind her repeated the process, creating a wave-like motion. But…

“Ah.”

Asama looked back at the voice she heard and saw Naito and Naruze bow after a short delay as they followed behind Mitotsudaira and Kimi. Adele was also slow to bow behind those two. Kimi’s and Mitotsudaira’s hair had apparently blocked the view ahead.

That happens a lot, she thought while looking back where Naito, Naruze, and Adele were all wearing various colors of shrine maiden outfit.

She could understand Adele’s as it was simply colored with the shade of dark blue known as Musashi Blue, but…

“I know it’s my family’s shrine, but why in the world did we have Weiss Hexen and Schwarz Hexen shrine maiden outfits?”

“Heh heh. Perhaps we can thank Musashi’s 160 years of history for that.”

“Maybe so,” agreed Asama as she thought about Shino’s tolerance once more.

…*It’s true Musashi is still a refuge for people being pursued by the other nations.*

Actual criminals were not allowed onboard, but those being treated as criminals due to personal or national circumstances were accepted and protected by Shinto.

It did not matter what religion they belonged to.

Of course, from a purification standpoint, they often had to let go of a few impurities.

…But Naito and Naruze were handled by one of our jurisdictional shrines when they came to Musashi.

She did not know much about them from back then. That was because her father had been in charge of it and the jurisdictional shrine had been the Atsuta Shrine of Mikawa origin found on Tama and Murayama.

But she doubted it had been a bad experience.

The Atsuta Shrine was a combat-style shrine that specialized in prayer song attacks and combat spells. They had supported the fighting during the Harmonic Unification War, so they had declined considerably since then. But the Asama Shrine had decided too strong an influence from the Testament Union would be dangerous and had wanted to provide the Musashi with the protection of multiple shrines, so ever since, Atsuta had received the benefits of the Asama Shrine just like the Suwa Shrines which had a similar history.

After the persecution leading to their decline, Atsuta and other combat shrines could understand the feelings of the people arriving from other nations. That was why the combat shrines were in charge of the entrance from other nations.

The two Technohexen currently held their broom cases and bags for pens and the like, but…

"Dressing Technohexen up like shrine maidens? Is this some kind of punishment?"

"Don't say that, Ga-chan. You look cute in all that white."

"Judge. The scary thing is how hearing that puts me in a pretty good mood. Also…"

Naruze looked back at the girl carrying a long spear.

"Yeah, I never thought I'd be working part-time as a shrine maiden for my vassal job."

Instead of her usual uniform, Adele wore a shrine maiden outfit that was not at all baggy on her.

"Thanks for helping out." Asama smiled at her. "And 'Okutama' will be piloting for us, but can you three help her out, Naito, Naruze, and Adele?"

"Judge. When you get your vassal's license, they make you learn how to pilot an aerial ship that can carry your mobile shell or transport a unit of vassals. The standards haven't changed in forever, so I can pilot up to a Dragon-class. …That said, I have almost no experience with it. But I think I can give some tactical suggestions based on the ship's movements and the Extra Special Duty Officer's instructions."

"Then I guess we'll help determine the range and how to respond from up in the air." Naruze opened a Magie Figur. "But flying will use up a lot of *auspuff*, so we'll mostly leave it up to Adele. This is supposed to be an investigation, so we'll focus more on firing and support spells."

"Please do."

After replying to Naruze, Asama used a sign frame to gather together the ship control terminal spell that "Okutama" sent to her. She tapped the sign frame to place the program in a folder and tossed it to Naruze and Adele.

Naruze caught it with the tip of the pen in her hand.

"Can I copy this for Margot?"

"Since you're working for us."

"Judge."

Naruze nodded and checked the spell with Naito.

…Now then.

Asama felt like everything was continuing as normal while also beginning to shift away from that somewhat.

…Suzu-san must be worried and we're going to be sweaty, so we might

want to stop by the bathhouse again once we get back.

As she continued walking with that in mind, the pier came to an end.

Just one more step and she would be on the ship where several management automatons were bowing.

She clapped once and bowed.

“This is the Asama Shrine representative and five others working on our behalf. …We would like to borrow this ship and leave the stealth barrier in order to investigate the cause behind the mysterious phenomena occurring around the Musashi.”

“So they won’t fight back, but they will investigate. The Far East has grown surprisingly academic. Don’t you think, hm?”

Two people stood below a large torii on a rocky coast in the sky which was changing from evening to night.

This was the eastern coast of Aki’s floating island of Itsukushima.

One of the people was human and the other was a demon. The human spoke as the wind whipped at his robe.

“We’re supposed to be heading into an exciting era, so doesn’t the Far East seem oddly obedient, hm? What do you think that means, Galileo?”

“It is likely exactly what you are thinking about on a daily basis, former boy. …The Far East and its center in Mikawa are doing quite well for themselves with their dragon line reactor weapons factory and their neutral ground between the Mlasi and the Catholics. They don’t need to do anything more, so they can just wait for the Thirty Years’ War and the Warring States period to end.”

“Even with the approaching Apocalypse?”

“That too is exactly what you are thinking about on a daily basis. …No, it is what you will eventually be heading out to confirm. Mikawa’s Matsudaira Motonobu suppressed the Second Shimabara Rebellion. He has plenty of knowledge of Catholicism and the Testament, so he has to have something in mind.”

Just as the demon said that, a *cadena firma* appeared next to them. It displayed a girl wearing a formal uniform.

“Papa Schola, Lord Galileo, the ‘waves’ we have been discussing have appeared in that airspace.”

“Oh? So it’s the omen or cause of the mysterious phenomena brought by the Apocalypse, is it? It’s another irregular pulse caused by stagnation in or damage to the ley lines, is it?” The Papa Schola turned toward Galileo. “Hey, what do you think?”

“You have a bad habit of asking without specifying the question, former boy. But…”

Galileo held his three-clawed hand up toward the sky as if grasping the ley line flowing through that space.

“I was the one to propose that theory. Now we can only wait for it to be proven with England’s observations…but most likely, the greatest mysterious phenomenon that we call the Apocalypse began on a worldwide scale and is causing an irregular pulse on a worldwide scale. …Of course, this is occurring on a spatial level and we cannot perceive spatial changes, so we have no idea what is happening. We are being distorted along with the spatial transformation.”

“But if you simplify those distortions, doesn’t it end up like that, hm? Look.”

The Papa Schola gestured into the sky with his chin. Something like a bird was visible far in the distance. It glowed bluish-white as the sky was dyed in the colors of night.

“That is a Non-Dragon Sword, former boy. But that is different from what we saw yesterday. This is more like the local gods using the stagnation to appear. And it has not been promptly eliminated. …That of course means K.P.A. Italia is going to spend plenty of time in negotiations before demanding Musashi eliminates it, right?”

“Well, it is certainly dangerous. A Non-God Sword appeared on our theatre ship yesterday. If we don’t send some of the trouble their way, they could say we’re at the source of the stagnation.”

“Could that possibly be true?”

“You said the mysterious phenomena are on a worldwide scale, didn't you?"

Galileo smiled bitterly at that response.

Merchant ships and passenger ships were giving the Non-Dragon Sword a wide berth while attempting to enter the Musashi. The Papa Schola spoke as he looked up at them and at Aki's large torii.

"We also need to make some preparations in a hurry. Don't you think, hm?"

"Yes, Mr. Murakami is making his preparations too. I would like to step down from my temporary position as Vice Chancellor as soon as possible, so I ask that you take care of that, former boy. The dissolved Honganji forces will soon move to the other nations and strengthen the seeds of war."

"Yes, we need to strengthen our personnel and our firepower. After all, K.P.A Italia uses a powerful aerial combat force in the Second Battle of Kizugawaguchi."

He went on to add a "but".

The Papa Schola narrowed his eyes and raised his eyebrows as he looked to the Non-Dragon Sword flying near where the unseen Musashi flew in stealth mode.

"There might be a troublesome bonus here for Musashi. How about we see what they can do, hm?"

As soon as he said that, a light raced through the clear sky. It flew toward the Musashi and the flying Non-Dragon Sword.

It was a flash of lightning.

The Non-Dragon Sword had not caused it.

"What is that?" The Papa Schola frowned. "How incomprehensible. I think it's a stagnation, so is this yesterday's Non-God Sword taking on a clearer form to prevent its remnants from being consumed? That would seem to ignore the law of conservation of ether…"

His frown only grew when he identified what the distant object.

"It shouldn't be possible, but there it is! Galileo, have them measure this. It's probably exactly what I'm imagining it is! The Non-Dragon Sword's influence has changed the shape of the 'mold', but it's manifesting with more than its original amount of ether! Most likely, this is a rare type only seen under the influence of the Musashi and its Mikawa origins!"

"Is it just me or are you enjoying this, former boy?"

"Of course I am." The corners of the Papa Schola's mouth rose. "This is going to be a pain later, so I've got to enjoy it while I can. Look, it's turning into a Hidden Dragon!"

It arrived as soon as the stealth barrier's "gate" opened and Asama's group left.

Adele was the first to react.

"Huh?"

She tilted her head.

"There are two dragons? A white one and a red one."

Everyone reacted to her question by spreading their mouths horizontally.

"Huh?" said Adele again.

…Did I make a bad joke or something?

As soon as she asked herself that, she sensed noise and wind from the bow of the ship behind her. She looked back, thinking it had to do with the "gate" closing, but…

"Ohh, it's that red dragon."

"N-no, wait." Naito held up her broom. "This is…definitely unprecedented. For another major one to manifest in such a short time, that is."

To agree with her, Asama gave a shout. She breathed in and filled her voice with resolve.

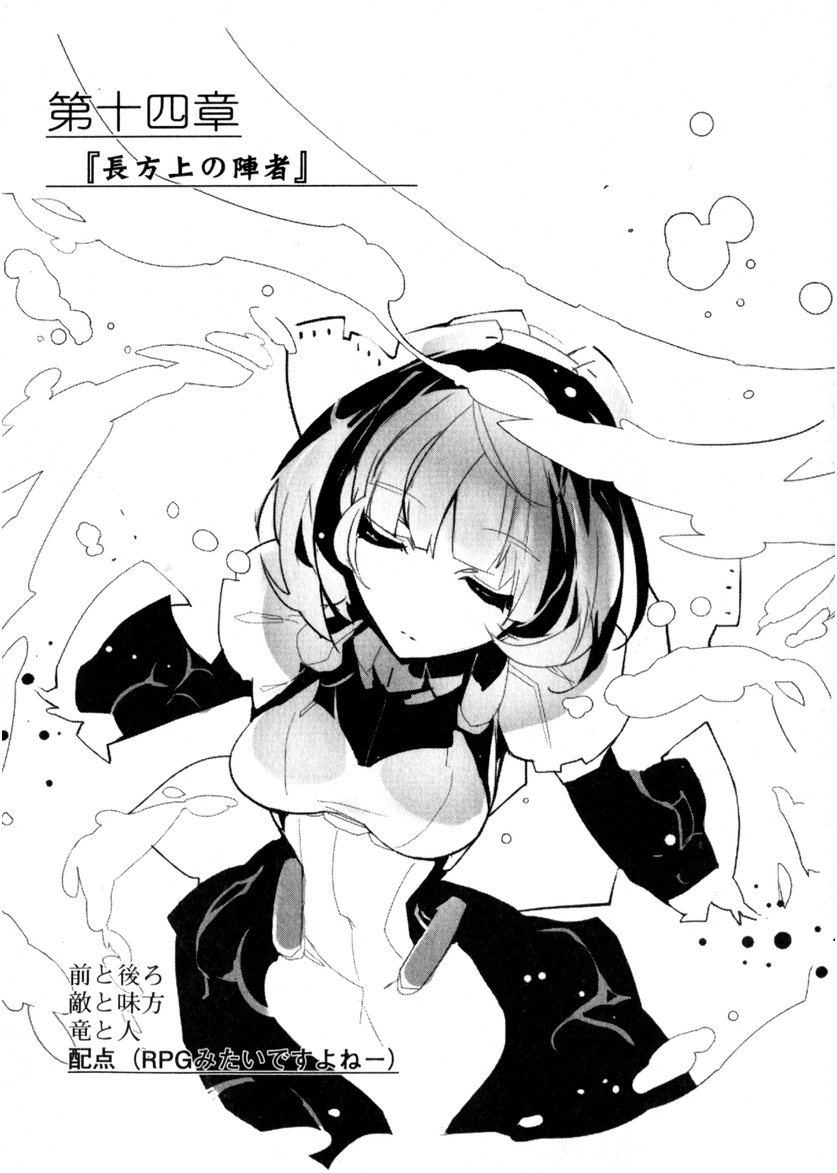
"Prepare our defenses! Close Musashi's defense barrier! The Asama Shrine will intercept on emergency authority! …The enemy is a mid-level Hidden Dragon! This will be a nonstandard and immediate battle!"

Another voice reached them, as if to agree.

The twenty meter red dragon released a bestial roar from its mouth.

That signaled the beginning of the battle.

Chapter 14: Position-Taker atop a Rectangle


第十四章
『長方上の陣者』
前と後ろ
敵と味方
竜と人
配点（RPGみたいですよねー）

Front and back

Enemy and ally

Point Allocation (It’s a lot like an RPG, isn’t it?)

“A Hidden Dragon appeared outside? There was no sign of that happening, but it is true, isn’t it? Over.”

On the stairs up to Okutama’s academy, “Musashi” rested her hips on the railing as a divine transmission from a fellow automaton raced through her mind.

A Hidden Dragon was a rare ether creature and mysterious phenomenon and she understood perfectly well why one would appear.

It was due to the Non-God Sword from the previous day. And a report from the Asama Shrine confirmed her thoughts.

The Provisional Council’s economic faction, which was centered on Konishi who was trading with Aki and the coastal nations, was currently sending protests to K.P.A. Italia.

Since this was related to the Non-God Sword, the Hidden Dragon would be due to K.P.A. Italia’s failure to tune the stagnation. So Konishi was taking advantage of their situation by using an open divine transmission channel for their negotiation because “it’s an emergency and I’m on a trade ship”.

And as a merchant, Konishi was very, very humble in his negotiations.

“Umm, Italia? Might I speak with you? We seem to have run across a problem. And well, um, the thing is…yes, there seems to have been a bit of an accident that is not our responsibility. Yes, we have not held a detailed investigation, so we aren’t entirely sure whether or not it is an accident. But for the time being, I see it is an ‘accident’ and I think we were simply unlucky here. Ha ha ha. …Oh? I certainly couldn’t determine what nation caused this accident. I was simply telling you that it seems to have been an ‘accident’.”

“Musashi” worried he would run out of time and it would all be over before he even got to his main point.

But K.P.A. Italia insisted that this was not their mistake and that

Aki was to blame because they owned and directed the Noh Stage. Furthermore…

…Do they intend to simply call this an unpredictable mysterious phenomenon?

Musashi was investigating the ley lines and their stagnations with the Asama Shrine. K.P.A. Italia was bringing out Aki's Itsukushima Shrine to confront them.

Of course, trouble on the level of a Hidden Dragon – while not common – was expected for the Musashi. There was no point in beginning a conflict between the Asama Shrine and the Itsukushima Shrine over that.

So K.P.A. Italia was prepared to compromise by calling it an "unpredictable mysterious phenomenon".

Everyone knew that was an excuse.

But if Musashi accepted that excuse, K.P.A. Italia would likely make it worth their while and K.P.A. Italia had the negotiation ability to get their own people to accept some slight inconvenience.

That left just one problem.

"Asama-kun, Tamako, and the others out there."

Someone spoke from the top of the stairs. This time it was not Torii doing an impression. It was the real one.

"Sakai-sama, what brings you here? Over."

"Musashi" heard Sakai's voice.

He was looking port where Asama's group was likely fighting the Hidden Dragon outside.

"To be blunt, isn't this kind of bad? And how did something as powerful as a Hidden Dragon show up out of the blue like this?"

"Judge. The details are not known, but it has undoubtedly appeared. We can only wait for Asama-sama and the others to return with their investigation results. But I am worried about Asama-sama and 'Okutama' out there because they are somewhat overpowered. Even if a Hidden Dragon is a mysterious phenomenon created from a stagnation, it still has the traits of a dragon. They will have received the lessons on flying a ship against a dragon in the third year of middle school and the lessons on fighting against a dragon are part of the second year high school curriculum, but… Over.”

“Judge. I asked Makiko-kun and she said they haven’t made it that far yet.”

“Judge. As Principal, what do you intend to have them do? Over.”

“If things start looking bad, run away.”

After a three second pause, “Musashi” gave some sporadic applause.

“Well done, Sakai-sama. I believe that is a very Far Eastern answer. Over.”

“Is it? You’re making me blush.”

“Judge. After all…that means they are to fight if it does not start looking bad. Over.”

“You shouldn’t twist people’s words. Don’t you think, ‘Musashi’-san?”

“Twisting your words? But isn’t that what it means to ‘teach’? Preparing them for anything they might encounter is what it means to teach them and raise them. …Regardless, I would like for Asama-sama and the others to do their very best. Over.”

“You’re really strict, ‘Musashi’-san.”

Sakai scratched his head and placed his kiseru in his mouth. And…

“Why aren’t you moving from the railing there?”

“You saw? Over.”

“Saw what?”

He tilted his head as he removed his coat and placed it over the back of her shoulders.

“Now, let’s go, ‘Musashi’-san.”

“Judge. Yes, let us go. Over.”

“I guess I’ll ask. Go where?”

“I intend to visit Tama’s main deck. Is that a problem? We must wait for Asama-sama and ‘Okutama’ to return through the stealth barrier. And in the meantime…”

Yes.

“You can help me kill some time by drinking the tea I serve you and praising me while we hold a pointless conversation. Over.”

The ship immediately became a battlefield.

Asama reacted by clapping her hands for an auditory activation of an instantaneous divine protection. Everyone within earshot was provided three Blessings’ worth of protection against physical and ether attacks for one minute. And…

…A Hidden Dragon!

It was a type of stagnation. It ranked at the mid-level, but it was extremely close to reaching the high-level. After all, the stagnation was using a dragon “mold” to appear. It was made of stagnant ether, but its abilities were much like those of a dragon.

However…

“What is going on!? It wasn’t just the Non-Dragon Sword!? Was there any sign of this?”

Naruze shouted her questions while sweeping her pen around to activate several firing spells. Asama responded while staring at the Hidden Dragon from the deck on the bow of the ship.

“There was no advance warning! This Hidden Dragon suddenly appeared here without any metamorphosis process for the ether stagnation!”

…A mysterious phenomenon – especially one this large – should have shown some kind of movement in advance.

Even the Non-God Sword from the day before had gone through a formation process to appear. But this Hidden Dragon was different.

It had suddenly appeared just as they left the stealth barrier.

There has to be some trick to it, thought Asama. Kimi must have realized the same thing because she smiled bitterly.

“Perhaps it was the remnants of yesterday’s Non-God Sword. If a local god with a dragon form created the Non-Dragon Sword and attempted to consume it, the remnants of the Non-God Sword may have obtained the dragon ‘mold’ from the Non-Dragon Sword and become a Hidden Dragon.”

“If so, the only mystery is the speed with which it appeared…”

“That’s right,” replied Kimi as the enemy charged in. And…

…*Wings!*

The original Non-Dragon Sword had wings, so the Hidden Dragon di as well. It spread the wings that were also its front legs, shook them, and made a high-speed charge.

As the red giant rushed toward the bow of the ship, someone moved out in front.

“Mito!!”

Mitotsudaira realized her own mistake after activating three spell shields.

…*This isn’t an opponent you can defend against, is it!?*

She had not trained for a battle against a dragon. She had some knowledge on the subject, but it was not enough to put together a real strategy and it was certainly not enough to plan for a Hidden Dragon in particular.

That had led her to fall back on the fundamentals, but that had been a mistake.

She had thought she could handle an attack from the front legs or a swing of the head. She had trained against defense barriers meant to emulate a god of war and she could endure strikes on that level. But…

…*This is far more massive!*

If the ether had been incarnated, it had to weigh over sixty tons. That was more than five times a god of war and it had achieved some impressive acceleration with its wings.

This was not something an individual could defend against. So…

“Kh…”

Mitotsudaira twisted her body to dodge. But…

…I’m too slow!

She had already known this, but she lacked speed. But even so…

“…!”

There was no point in stopping her evasive action. She moved toward port. Of course, she could not just dodge. The others were behind her and it was a knight’s duty to protect them.

…I can’t just run away!

She abandoned the shields in midair. Those shields could defend against a bullet, but she doubted they would be any more useful than paper against this charge.

But she still hoped they would buy the others enough time to dodge.

And even as she made that knightly action, the rational part of her mind told her *she was not going to make it in time.*

Her body was not going to escape one of the Hidden Dragon’s claws. But…

…Don’t worry!

She decided to trust herself. No matter what result awaited her, she had done her very best.

“No regrets!”

As soon as she shouted that, a voice answered her.

“Judge. No one as softhearted as you would leave anything to regret!”

She saw the golden color of wings and hair.

It was Margot Naito.

As Mitotsudaira rolled out of the way, she saw Naito in the center of her vision.

Naito was a classmate, she worked as a pair with Naruze among the many skilled people in the delivery business, and she was a Schwarz Hexen on the way to the upper levels. Just like Asama and Ohiroshiki, she already had a future to look forward to after graduation.

Mitotsudaira had been fairly good friends with this Technohexen, but…

…I didn't know we were close enough to rely on in a deadly battle!

"Mito-tsan!"

Naito's voice cut away Mitotsudaira's hesitant thoughts.

"Your hand!!"

Hearing that, Mitotsudaira reflexively reached out her hand. She was not even thinking as she did so.

And in that instant, Mitotsudaira had a thought.

…Have I…!?

Have I taken the first step away from my former relationship with the others?

But her question was swept aside by the tug on her hand that felt like it would pull her shoulder from its socket.

"————!"

Mitotsudaira allowed Naito's acceleration to pull her to safety.

…Oh.

As Asama ran out of the way, she saw Mitotsudaira dodge. The girl's silver hair swayed behind her as she leaped to the left, rolled, and was picked up by Naito.

"————————"

From Asama's position, it was impossible to tell if she had escaped the Hidden Dragon's claws, but…

"She's changed."

Asama heard Naruze speak while flying out of the Hidden Dragon's way. That Weiss Hexen classmate's voice contained no sarcasm and it was obvious to what it referenced.

…The past.

Long ago, from a certain incident until middle school, Mitotsudaira had distanced herself from the others.

It would be wrong to simply say she had been violent. After all, her power had been used to save the weak and crush the strong.

At school and in the streets near her home, she had enacted the justice of a knight and a feudal lord. And she was also provisionally second in line to ruling the Far East, so…

…She seemed to be proving to herself that she was a noble person.

She had not wanted to become a mere replacement for someone who had been lost and so she had rebelled, but she had simultaneously tried to act nobly so she would be an appropriate substitute.

But that had been stopped by a certain opportunity and by a certain person. She was still trying to make up for it.

Everyone else felt Mitotsudaira had punished herself enough, but she was still not satisfied.

"…!"

But sending herself rolling along the deck was not something she had done while trying to be "noble". And while she had saved the weak and crushed the strong, she had not tried to protect her classmates who were her equals.

…*Yes.*

Mitotsudaira was still punishing herself, but a formerly unthinkable version of herself was emerging on the other side. So to help her…

“Naito!!”

Asama raised her voice after reaching safety. She wanted to further ensure Mitotsudaira’s escape.

“I’ll send some defenses, so move out of the way for now!”

The battlefield’s first action was complete.

Everyone on the deck had avoided the Hidden Dragon’s charge.

The Hidden Dragon turned to glare at the bridge that rose from the back of the deck like an iron. After finding no moving enemies there, it looked back toward the bow.

There was an enemy there.

I have been noticed, thought “Okutama”.

As the Hidden Dragon looked back, its gaze landed on her.

But when she looked to the arrangement of people on the deck…

“I have determined that is a poor arrangement. Over.”

Mitotsudaira had become their vanguard, so her inability to resist the Hidden Dragon’s charge had been a serious blow. Even after everyone dodged the charge by moving to the left or right, the overall layout had essentially been rotated 180 degrees.

Currently, “Okutama” was on the right of the vanguard and Naruze was on the left.

About fifteen meters behind them, Kimi and Adele formed the starboard side of the second row and Asama formed the port side.

The third and final row was another fifteen meters behind the second row and it was made up of Naito and Mitotsudaira on the port side.

“Okutama” had a general idea what strategy the Hidden Dragon would use next. Her knowledge as an automaton of course contained methods of fighting dragons. But…

…The others…

A summary of their school lessons showed the high school second years had yet to learn how to directly fight a dragon. That was also evident from Mitotsudaira’s earlier decision.

After seeing Mitotsudaira’s response and the result, it was possible the others would be frozen in fear. As a knight, Mitotsudaira was the superior of a vassal like Adele, so Mitotsudaira’s failure had an especially high probability of leaving that girl unsure what to do.

…That’s it! Adele-sama!!

Adele had quite a few fans among the automatons. She made two laps of each ship during her daily running, so a lot of the automatons saw her on a regular basis. And when she was running, she would pick up a lot of animal fans among the stray dogs and pet dogs allowed to wander free, so an impressive dog train could be seen in the mornings and evenings. But she also extended her running course on a daily basis, so a lot of automatons also found it worthwhile to record that “daily measurement”.

“Okutama” determined she had to protect Adele for the sake of her fellow automaton’s measurements. To do that, she determined she should escort everyone on this battlefield. And then…

“ ‘Okutama’-san, can I ask something of you?”

She heard Adele’s voice from behind. Was the girl placing her in command?

…If so…

“Okutama” made up her mind and nodded just as Adele continued speaking.

“Can you take care of the vanguard? As a captain automaton, you have a weapon, right?”

“…Huh? Over.”

She prepared to ask, “You aren’t placing me in command?” But…

“————!”

The Hidden Dragon roared.

But this was more than just a roar. A beam of light shot from deep within its throat.

This was a dragon cannon.

It was a textbook action for a dragon battle. After making a high-speed charge to scatter its enemies, it would use a dragon cannon to sweep them all away.

…*And once the scattered troops are blown away, they won’t be able to communicate with each other.*

Then the dragon could take its time hunting them down, starting with the most powerful. It would not start with the weak. It was a dragon.

And to do exactly that, the dragon’s soft neck bent like a whip and released its dragon cannon.

The beam of light swept across the deck in a fan shape.

“Okutama” leaped into the air to jump over the dragon cannon and then quickly checked her surroundings.

Heatless light raced past below the feet she pulled up toward her body.

That was the dragon cannon.

A hit from that would destroy her, but she had gained enough height to clear it. However…

…*What about the others!?*

Her fellow automatons did not have an answer for her in her shared memory. They were on the Musashi inside the stealth barrier. That said, a few of them were operating the investigation ship.

“ ‘Okutama’-sama, we will play the role of those on the Musashi.

Over.”

“I predict 32% of them would say, ‘Adele-sama is deeeeeeeead!!’ Over.”

“I predict 18% of them would say, ‘I expect Kimi-sama blocked it with her Giant Breasts Defense.’ Over.”

“I predict 40% of them would say, ‘How will “Okutama” respond?’ Over.”

“I predict 10% of them would say something else or be too busy to respond. Over.”

Surprised that so many would be focused on her reaction, “Okutama” completed her jump over the fan-shaped sweep of the dragon cannon and looked to the others.

They had not known how to react to a dragon, so she was worried. Especially because the dragon cannon had been fired without any charging up first.

They could easily have been hit. But…

…Eh?

They were all okay.

Some had ducked and some had jumped, but they had all avoided the dragon cannon.

…They are unharmed!

“Okutama” determined their safety was a wonderful thing, but she worked at analyzing what had happened. Then she noticed something on the Hidden Dragon’s face and shoulders.

“Defense barriers!? Over.”

Asama had made a split second decision.

Even if she was a shrine maiden of the Asama Shrine, she was still only mid-level. She managed Musashi’s ether pathways, contracts, and divine protections for her job, but fighting mysterious phenomena was too much for a mid-level shrine maiden.

And dragons were high-level beings.

To pass the high-level shrine maiden exam, one had to know how to deal with that sort of high-level mysterious phenomenon, but Asama had only just reached the mid-level. So…

…I need to find a way to use my more fundamental abilities!

So she had used a spell.

"I cast the weakest of the defense spells on various parts of the Hidden Dragon!"

Protecting their enemy with defense barriers seemed like a bad decision, but she had a reason.

"This will make it easier to see what the Hidden Dragon is doing!"

…They used that in the vassal training too, didn't they?

Naruze used her wings to fly out into the sky even lower down than the deck.

There was no hesitation or waste in her flying movements.

That was because she could see the Hidden Dragon's movements.

She did not even need to ask why. Her vision told her everything.

"The defense barriers!"

The defense barriers created by the spells were giant flat panels.

Asama had cast them on the Hidden Dragon. There were positioned in five different locations: the front of the snout, the shoulders, the tip of the front claws, and the base of the tail.

This seemed to benefit the enemy, but it did not.

The defense barriers were set high, so a close-range attack was unlikely to hit them. And since they were on the front, they were poorly positioned for facing an opponent.

They had been set there for a reason.

…To show its movements more clearly!

The giant rectangular panels displayed the dragon's movements with their angle and corners. The glowing panels picked up on the slightest movement and telegraphed it for all to see. They could predict the angle at which it would swing its head and they could guess the point at which it would charge forward after hunkering down. This allowed them to predict its movements from the earliest stages, so those who could fly could fly and the rest could duck.

Basically, they were carefully observing their enemy. No matter how powerful it was, its attacks were meaningless if they could not hit.

Since they were not used to dragon opponents, Asama's method was very effective. Knowing how their opponent would move gave them an important advantage.

But, thought Naruze. *While it was Asama who came up with and implemented the idea, the core of the idea must have been Adele's training.*

…For the vassal training held in the second schoolyard, "Musashi" uses defense barriers to represent the movements of a god of war.

Adele always took the lead and ran out ahead, but that was not just because the girl was quick on her feet. She also knew how to read the movements of the defense barriers.

The giant panels told her more than just whether or not they were about to move. They also told her how they would move.

This was the same.

So Naruze and Margot had flown off of the ship, Adele had gotten down on the deck, Asama had done the same, and Kimi…

"…Huh? Wait, Asama! With the boobs part of the shrine maiden uniform pressing in on the sides, my boobs prop me up when I get down on the deck. I can't get down any lower than this. …What's that look for, Adele?"

"K-Kimi! Press the button on the side of the chest to free the side restraints! Do that and you can squish them down! …What is that look for, Adele?"

This should help with my storyboard.

…And Mitotsudaira is giving you two the same look over there, so why not look her way too?

With that thought, Naruze felt the wind move as the scorching light passed by overhead.

Having briefly dipped down below the deck, she flipped backwards, spread her wings, and let the wind fill her main wings.

"…!"

With a single flap of her main wings, she flew up to thirty meters above the deck.

She could see the red Hidden Dragon on the back of the deck below.

"Okutama" was the starboard side vanguard and Naruze was the port side vanguard.

She and "Okutama" were unharmed, so if they looked powerful, the Hidden Dragon would prioritize attacking them. Dragons had a natural preference for the strong.

So to stay in motion, she flew in a wide square wave pattern.

"Herrlich!!"

And she fired coins at the dragon as homing rounds. "Okutama" also took action.

"Here I go! Over."

"Okutama's" method of attack was simple.

She used water. Hardened bamboo sprinklers were installed in several locations across the top of the ship for cleaning purposes, but…

"Release all cleaning standards on the upper deck. Open #1-32. Over."

The water started spraying out even as she spoke. The sound was reminiscent of scattering sand or tearing paper, but it was clearly that of spraying water. However, none of it reached the deck.

As it fell randomly toward the deck, it formed a series of curving lines that looked like sheet music behind "Okutama" while also spiraling around. Standing in front of it, "Okutama" gently spread her arms and then brought them back together to weave the empty air.

"Ship purification spell – Ice River. This barrage is made to remove all impurities from the surface of a ship. Please prepare yourself. Over."

With that, she swung her arms forward.

Immediately, the five lines of sheet music raced through the air.

"…! Over."

They struck the dragon's side from the front left.

Asama watched the battle while continually casting divine protection spells on everyone.

…*Wow.*

"Okutama" and Naruze were making rapid-fire attacks.

"Okutama" used high-pressure water attacks and Asama knew just how powerful they were. The purification of the ship surfaces was a joint project between the ship shrines and the automatons.

But each ship was about two kilometers long, so the Musashi's sides were more than eight kilometers long in all. Normal methods were not enough to remove the impurities in a short period of time.

The Asama Shrine would use ether emissions to separate the impurities from the surface, but the automatons were the ones that used their gravitational control to actually remove the impurities. However, that gravitational control only worked on points, so they were poorly suited for a wide area.

That was why they used water as a medium.

Even with the power distributed over the wide area, it could break the ice stuck to the hull armor and split the caked-on sandstone. If that was focused together at close range…

"…!"

She clearly heard the solid sound of flesh being struck. The Hidden Dragon's giant body swayed and then it was hit by Naruze's attack from the air.

Naruze targeted its face.

As "Okutama" repeatedly struck from the left, the guided coin rounds shot down from the sky. The coin rounds were a little weak, but that was why Naruze aimed for the face.

…To blind it!

Even as Asama thought that, she focused on her own job.

"Made it in time!!"

As soon as she shouted that, the dragon roared.

This was different from the previous dragon cannon. The ether used for the dragon cannon was placed on top of the roaring voice for…

…An explosive dragon cannon!!

The attack arrived.

Asama saw the surrounding scenery bend as the atmosphere grew distorted. The dragon's ether-carrying cry swept across everything.

It was a lot like a massive purification.

That was why the ether light providing Naruze's shots with their homing power was swept away and the water of "Okutama's" Ice River was scattered.

Asama knew what would happen next.

Now that the roar had nullified their attacks, the next dragon cannon was coming. But Asama spoke before that could happen.

"We made it in time."

Three things had made it in time.

The first was the divine protection spell that would protect Naruze and “Okutama” from the explosive roar. Asama had also cast the spell on herself and the others.

At the mid-level, she could not use a spell meant for a high-level opponent, but since she cast multiple spells together and made adjustments based on the element of the attack, Naruze only had her feathers somewhat ruffled as she flew through the air.

And the second…

“Kimi, take care of this!”

Kimi got up across from her on the starboard side.

She began to dance. She had already activated Turning Point and begun to sing.

That allowed her to use a spell, but it was not something she cast on herself.

“Heh heh. I can preserve your spell, Asama, and it will last as long as I continue my song and dance. …I can only preserve it for the length of a single song, so hurry up and end this, you silly girls!”

Someone moved in response to Kimi’s voice.

It was the last person who had made it in time.

“Adele!”

Adele raced straight toward the Hidden Dragon in her generic shrine maiden uniform.

And she was using a Far Eastern acceleration spell.

Adele felt light.

She held a vassal’s training spear and something had opened in front of her.

…A Far Eastern acceleration spell!

It was named Crocodile Crossing. Each of her steps grew as long and surefooted as a hopping rabbit. For someone as short as her, it extended each step by quite a bit.

“Here I go!”

She ran forward.

Asama had sent Crocodile Crossing to her and its control sign frame was open next to her face. She of course did not know how to control it and her user privileges limited her, so it was being adjusted by Hanami, Asama’s Mouse, who was inside the sign frame so it would not be affected by the ether outside.

…And it’s there to prevent the spell from growing too powerful.

Adele was Catholic.

In Musashi, Catholicism was against the rules. That was due to the first rebellion at Shimabara fifty years before and the second rebellion by the remnants twenty years before. Together, those were known as the Shimabara Rebellions held by the Far Eastern Catholics and that had led to the history recreation of the Far East’s ban on Catholicism.

So officially she was a “hidden” Catholic. The Asama Shrine handled Musashi’s contracts, so they acted as an intermediary for people like her and allowed them to use a fake “hidden” god.

This was the same.

Shinto was open-minded, so they would accept any religion even after the ban. Even if the other religion did not accept other religions, Shinto was willing to permit even that way of thinking.

So Asama had sent the acceleration spell through that “hidden” god. And the power was regulated to ensure it did not violate Adele’s Catholic faith.

She felt this was showing too much consideration for a vassal like her. So…

“Vassal Adele Balfette will show you her very best dash!!”

She did not need to fear the Hidden Dragon.

It had leaned forward and extended its face forward and down to prepare for its explosive roar, so Adele raced toward its throat.

She made a quick slide.

"…!"

She was briefly reminded of that afternoon.

In her vassal training, she had been too slow for "Musashi's" defense barriers.

If the same thing happened here…

"It's fine!"

She raised her eyebrows and her voice.

"I have everyone with me now!!"

Asama saw Adele raise her spear.

She was making a charging jab.

But Adele was light and weak. There was no point in throwing the spear and it only gained destructive power when she slammed it into her target using her entire body.

She had the speed and solid footing needed for that.

"…!"

But the dragon released the voice deep in its throat.

It could not fire a dragon cannon again so soon. It could try, but it lacked the power for the previous explosion or a traditional dragon cannon. All it did was release the dispersing light from its mouth.

Then, thought Asama.

…It's trying to…

The defense divine protections cast on Adele were revealed as sign frames when they were hit by the weak dragon cannon. The single blast had smashed around a dozen of them, but Crocodile Crossing and several of the defense spells were still active.

But the Hidden Dragon had roared for a different reason. It used the recoil to…

“————————”

Lift up the front of its giant body.

It dodged Adele’s attack, causing her to pass below it.

Adele was already preparing to hit with the spear, so she would trip. But then Asama raised her voice.

“We made it in time!”

Their true attack had arrived.

“Naito!”

By charging forward, Adele had created a gap in the air and broken a tunnel through the dragon’s roar.

A black shrine maiden uniform raced along that line on a broom.

But she was not the attacker.

“Ga-chan!” shouted Naito.

Two things happened.

First, Naito lifted her left leg from the broom and raised it high into the sky.

Second, something struck the bottom of her raised left foot.

“Herrlich!!”

It was Naruze’s homing shot. The ten yen coin accurately struck the sole of her shoe, providing her with its momentum.

“Excellent!”

Naito’s straight line path shifted into a triple roll toward starboard. Her head nearly spun right into the deck.

“Toh!”

So she hunkered down and added on another half rotation. She kicked at the deck to launch herself back into the sky.

Then two more things happened.

First, Adele turned the momentum of her dodged spear attack into a forward roll.

“Take this!”

As the vassal’s head rolled forward and her legs pointed skyward, she used the rolling momentum to throw her weapon backwards.

It was a long vassal’s spear.

Adele had thrown the large piercing weapon toward…

“Extra Special Duty Officer!!”

And second, Mitotsudaira, who had been carried here by Naito, caught the spear while running.

Mitotsudaira did not hesitate to run after landing from the broom.

Several defense sign frames appeared and disappeared around her. The defense barriers cast on her by Asama were reacting to the pressure of the dragon’s very presence.

She was being protected and the Hidden Dragon could not move so soon after dodging another attack.

So…

…Here I go!

She had poor speed, but Asama cast an acceleration spell on her. She was only given three steps with Crocodile Crossing, but that was enough to fill her with speed. When she took the third step, she felt more weight behind her stride than ever before.

Furthermore…

“Kh…”

The long spear was originally a knight’s weapon. She was reluctant to throw it, but she wrapped even her wrist around the handle. For a close-range attack, she rolled it from her wrist to her palm and threw it. That added a spin to the spear.

…What happens if I have both power and speed!?

She slammed it forward.

…Way to spear it with some real spirit!

Ah, I'm turning into Masazumi, thought Asama as she cast the final spell in time.

This would have been difficult for Catholic Adele to do.

It had only been possible with a Shinto musician like Mitotsudaira as an intermediary.

…I added an anti-mysterious phenomenon divine protection to the spear!

The spear was wrapped in bluish-white light. That would purify the ether composing the target, and…

"That will be a fatal blow to a stagnation!"

It was a direct hit.

The spear strike properly permeated the Hidden Dragon. The purification power tuned the ether that formed its dragon body. As a result, the stagnation that acted as the catalyst for its creation fell apart. And…

…It is released!

That was exactly what happened on the investigation ship's deck.

The attack pierced the bottom of the Hidden Dragon's chest all the way to the handle.

"————————!"

The dragon's body bent up and back while the hole in its chest grew.

A red light was visible through the hole. But the light grew the deeper one looked inside the hole and the Hidden Dragon’s body bent in that same direction.

“Hit.”

Asama heard a sound. It reminded her of a receding wave and the color white.

Beyond the repeated popping sounds, the rumble of the Hidden Dragon’s breath sounded like an extended flute note. But it was no longer preparing for a roar. As its body expanded and split apart, it sucked in air to expand the torn area where its lungs had been.

The expansion of power soon reached its limit.

The Hidden Dragon’s entire body came apart and burst like a popping balloon.

It no longer had a dragon’s form. It split apart and the fragments glowed as they vanished into the air. The remnants of its legs came apart and scattered like pillars of rolled paper.

“It’s over.”

Naruze descended from the sky with her eyebrows raised in a smile. But then…

…*Eh?*

Asama heard a slight sound. But it did not come from the sky or the sea below. It came from the air.

It came from the rear deck where the ether light was scattering.

“That’s…”

The dull creaking sound reminded her of a long, long inhalation.

As Adele left the remnants of the Hidden Dragon and caught her breath, she heard what sounded like a receding wave.

And she saw the light moving. The ether light that had scattered, fallen, and danced was now gathering back together.

It was moving back where the Hidden Dragon had been. And…

"Huh?"

Naruze landed on the deck in front of her, frowned, and asked a question.

"Wait, what? …Two!?"

It was obvious what she meant.

Like a wave pulling back into the sea, two new forms stood where the Hidden Dragon had been defeated. And…

"There are three!?"

The defeated Hidden Dragon stood in the center.

An additional two had formed on either side. They were a little smaller, but they had largish wings.

It had been resurrected and it had multiplied.

…What is going on!?

Asama looked at the three Hidden Dragons standing in front of them.

She knew she could not just write this off as "impossible", but she honestly did not understand what had happened.

The Hidden Dragon they had defeated as a stagnation had been resurrected and in greater numbers.

…Um…

She intuitively understood this was strange. After all, they had purified the ether stagnation. The Hidden Dragon had been created from the ley line stagnation, so it should not have been able to regain its original form and multiply right after that stagnation was purified.

Naruze spoke from the deck.

"I've been thinking…the name 'Hidden Dragon' sounds kind of lewd. What's with Shinto's naming sense?"

"Well, Demonic Dragon would be more accurate, but I think we don't like using that because a strong-sounding name might give it some kind of divine protection."

"I'm amazed you could give a serious answer to that, Asama-chi."

"C'mon, it's not that amazing. …Oh, that wasn't a compliment, was it?"

Meanwhile, the three dragons' bodies were fully established.

"————————"

The ship creaked under the dragons' combined weight.

…These Hidden Dragons are definitely being created from a stagnation as mysterious phenomena.

To Asama's left, "Okutama" removed her sleeves. This revealed her semi-lifelike arms which had shimmering heat rising from different points near the joints.

"Asama-sama, I have determined this is outside the norm. Musashi has sent Aki a request for help, but…"

"I've never seen a defeated mysterious phenomenon immediately recover and multiply into three, and I doubt we'd find anything like it in the Catholic records."

"Former boy, I am somewhat glad that we were able to witness this rare event."

"U-um, Papa-Schola? Lord Galileo? This is occurring in the sky near Aki, so shouldn't you be a little more worried…?"

"No, those are Sakai's students. And we have Aki as a buffer, so don't you think we should watch this in case it can help is in our future battles against and examinations of mysterious phenomena, hm? But…"

But…

"Three minutes. …If they can last hat long, approve their request.

I'd rather not anger Sakai here, even if it is indirectly. The mysterious phenomenon will not be the winner here. That role belongs to Catholicism, the Testament Union, and K.P.A. Italia."

Asama saw "Okutama" send over the value of "Three Minutes".

If they could last that long, reinforcements would arrive. But…

"Here they come!"

As soon as Mitotsudaira raised her voice, the dragons on the left and right started forward. They made the standard high-speed charge.

…*Wow.*

They reacted just fine. Asama had already cast the defense barriers on them just like before, so they were able to predict the path of the charges. And "Okutama" sent a divine transmission.

"Leave this to me. Over."

"Heh heh heh. You can last three minutes with ease? Then tell us how! If it is with ease, they will do so, but if it is with difficulty, they will try their best!"

"You're part of this too, Kimi!"

"Now, now," said "Okutama" as everyone gave her hopeful looks. "I have prepared evacuation routes into the ship. I have also set up anti-ether barriers, so please move behind them. However, there is only one route on the bow and one on the stern. Over."

Naruze immediately raised a hand.

"Are they high-speed shutters? Are there triple locks on the inside and do they connect directly to some vital shelters?"

"No, they are only pathways into the ship."

"With ships this size, you often hear about people fleeing inside only to have a dragon cannon blasted into the entrance or to have the entire ship sunk from multiple dragon cannons."

"No, this ship can-…" "Okutama" paused for a moment. "Oh, right.

This is not the Musashi. This is an investigation ship that would roast anyone inside if it was hit by a dragon cannon. I mistakenly went with the usual response. Please ignore my plan. Over."

None of them hesitated to give the automaton an accusatory look, but that did not solve anything.

"Here they come!"

The two dragons were charging in on the left and right. The girls could see the path the dragons would take, so the two Technohexen flew through the air and Adele ran. Mitotsudaira, Asama, and Kimi all tried to get out of the dragons' way.

Just as Asama thought they could dodge it, light arrived from between the two dragons.

The vermilion beam was a dragon cannon. The center Hidden Dragon that they had supposedly defeated earlier had fired another attack.

…*What!?*

Asama could tell the racing light was no less powerful than before.

They all bent their evasive action. The two Technohexen in the sky read the change in the dragon cannon's path and turned to face the Hidden Dragon in the back.

"…!"

They all successfully dodged it, but the swift wind struck Asama like a solid wall.

The pressure behind the wind slammed into her and pinned her to the deck. At that very moment, she heard a sound and saw a light.

The defense barriers she had cast on everyone were glowing as they audibly shattered.

They were blown away.

Chapter 15: Intruder on the Hunting Ground

第十五章
『狩り場の乱入者』
何故そこに
と思うよりも
何故それが
と叫ぶべきか
配点（核心）

Before wondering

“Why there?”

Should I shout

“Why that?”

Point Allocation (Crux)

At first, Asama did not understand what had happened.

The sign frame next to her face displayed everyone’s status and they were all unharmed.

But she also found she was collapsed on her side as something sent a heavy tremor through the floor.

…The Hidden Dragons…

“————!”

She came to her senses. She sat up and quickly got to her feet. Before even checking on her surroundings, she ran to the empty outer edge of the ship. Her body felt slightly heavy, but that was likely only the tremor in her muscles after falling over. She still had three defense barriers left. So…

“Everyone!”

They were all getting up, but Kimi alone was already standing with her arms lightly crossed.

She had her back to the others and she was unharmed.

“Asama,” she said quietly. “Check your number of Blessings after this. Those dragons seem to be targeting you.”

“Eh? Oh, r-right.”

Asama went ahead and agreed and she gained an understanding of the current situation. The first Hidden Dragon that they could call the parent was behind them and the two child ones were in front of them. They were trapped between the dragons, but…

“Eh?”

A wind suddenly blew in from behind them.

The parent Hidden Dragon had leaped up into the sky. That whipped up a massive amount of wind and shook the ship.

…It's running away?

“Former boy, one of them has fled.”

“Testament. Can we accuse Musashi of letting it escape?”

“Unfortunately, it originated from Aki.”

“What a pain… Don't just let it escape. Keep fighting until it's dead.”

“U-um? Papa-Schola? Lord Galileo?”

Asama realized the flying Hidden Dragon's escape route was taking it toward the Kojima Peninsula.

…We were right about it being the Non-God Sword created from the Aki stagnation.

That was why the Hidden Dragon was heading toward the origin of that ley line stagnation. That way it could recover. It might return soon, but for the moment…

“I have determined we must only endure those two for another two minutes and seventeen seconds. Over.”

“Heh heh. Things are looking much more hopeful now. But…”

Kimi spoke to the others as they got up.

“Here they come!”

Those words were accompanied by a second pair of high-speed charges.

Mitotsudaira shook her unsteady head and thought.

…I need to stay focused!

Those Hidden Dragons were undoubtedly learning. And they were learning from the previous Hidden Dragon that could be seen as their parent.

Sensing danger, Mitotsudaira confirmed that the Cerberus was still clinging to her head

Her mind was clear, but her body was still suffering from the previous impact.

…Tomo!

She had far fewer defense barriers than before. Asama was casting more, but she was too slow.

However, Mitotsudaira was not going to criticize Asama. That was why she did not call out to the girl. They could not receive any support from Musashi at the moment, so Asama did not have the ether usage rights of the Asama Shrine. That meant she had to secure her ether through other routes and methods. It was almost a miracle that she was creating enough defense barriers for everyone in the first place. Which meant…

“I just have to make up for it on my own!”

The second attack was coming. And…

“They’re intersecting!?”

Mitotsudaira saw something unbelievable.

The paths of two charging Hidden Dragons were intersecting. At this rate, their giant bodies would collide, but…

“Huh?”

The two of them fused together and then split apart. Almost like water combining and then splitting back out into distinct streams, their paths intersected on the left and right and then split off on the opposite sides.

“…!”

With simultaneous roars, they changed course as they flew in.

This was unexpected. The defense barriers Asama had cast on the dragons were entirely useless. Mitotsudaira had only one option.

"Kh…!"

She worked even harder to dodge, and…

…Will I make it in time!?

She felt she could not avoid the giant approaching form.

"!"

And in that instant, the Cerberus barked on her head.

Mitotsudaira heard the three-headed wolf's cry.

The trio of small voices was not expressing fear. Instead, it seemed to be scolding her. It seemed to be telling its hesitant master to get moving. So…

…Judge!

Mitotsudaira refocused her mind.

"This is…"

No matter what happened she could not let herself lose on the psychological level.

She had not yet received her king properly and her king was not in danger here.

She did not need to protect anyone. So…

"This is the time for battle!"

As soon as she said that, a power arrived as if in response.

…Eh?

As one Hidden Dragon flew toward her on the port side, something collided into it as a counterattack.

At first, she thought it was a god of war, but…

…No.

The size and shape were wrong.

A giant form passed by over her head and collided with the approaching Hidden Dragon. It was…

“The Non-Dragon Sword!?”

It was the Non-Dragon Sword.

Asama saw an incomprehensible attack that was far too gigantic to simply call it assistance.

It too had presumably been born of a stagnation.

“————!!”

The Non-Dragon Sword used the sword forming its wing to sever the port side Hidden Dragon’s front right leg. It also left a deep gash in the deck and let out a great roar. The explosive pressure of the roar and a shoulder tackle sent the port side Hidden Dragon flying.

…*What is going on?*

As Asama completed various preparations and cast more spells, the dragons clashed before her eyes.

Afterword

That was Kimitoasamade 2-A that continues right after the previous one. I finally got them in the bath.

Yes, I had established Suzu’s family as running a bathhouse and I had always wanted to find a chance to get the characters there in the main novels, but I never could find a chance. I feel like I finally managed it here.

Anyway, I think I was given a very valuable opportunity here. It isn’t often you get to write “separate main novels” that have a decent page count and are separate from the main novels. In fact, you never get to do that.

I already know how many of these I get to write and there’s a clear deadline, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to hold back or set an upper limit for myself. I want to make sure I won’t have any regrets. I hope this will be a valuable addition to the Horizon series.

Now for the chat.

“Did you see the final episode?”

“Yeah, it was pretty exciting. …All the previous Hero Sentais showed up.”

“That’s getting pretty recent!!”

“I have it recorded on my machine, but I’m missing Episode 7.”

“You should buy BD Volume 4 for that. It comes with commentary, so you benefit twice. You sure were lucky to have missed Volume 7!!”

“What is this, a religious proselytization?”

“Yeah, I was starting to think that too. That isn’t the best way to do things.”

“But you should advertise.”

“This will be in Volume 5.”

“Oh, wow! That’s so cool! Really!? I want it so bad! I’m buying that for sure!”

“That’s going a little too far.”

“Fine then. So what’s this about? Did you ever finish your previous series?”

“Do I have to explain everything from the very beginning!?”

Is there anything you can do about people who leave all this stuff behind once they get married?

Anyway, some dragons showed up and made a mess of things. My background music while working was the Musashi Song. I have what’s basically a demo version, but the gap of having those two sing like this is pretty powerful. It creates a nice atmosphere.

Anyway, this volume was about, “Who was the most well-prepared?” The next one will be with BD Volume 7 in two months, so wait just a little longer.

February 2012. A morning showing some snow.

-Kawakami Minoru

Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon - Kimitoasamade - Volume 02-A

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